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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

APRIL  
1991

## 'Crossroads' by Paul J. McAuley



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Overseas subscriptions are £28,  
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Order. Payments may also be  
made (in £ sterling only) by Access  
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check - \$42 (accelerated surface  
mail). Lifetime subscriptions: £230  
(UK); £280 (overseas); \$420 (U.S.  
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**Back-issues** are available at £2.30  
each in the UK (£2.50 each over-  
seas), postage included. (US dollar  
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# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 46

April 1991

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### Cover by Simon Watkins

Published monthly.  
All material is © *Interzone*, 1991

ISSN 0264-3596  
Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution through Diamond-Europress  
Sales & Distribution, Unit 1,  
Burgess Rd., Ivyhouse Lane,  
Hastings, E. Sussex TN35 4NR  
(tel. 0424 430422)

Bookshop distribution through Central Books,  
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN  
(tel. 081 896 4854)

U.S. and Canadian distribution through British  
Magazine Distributors Ltd., 598 Durham Crescent,  
Unit 14, Woodstock, Ontario N4S 5X3, Canada  
(tel. 519 421 1285) - both trade and  
individual queries welcomed.

Arts Council Funded

# Interface

## David Pringle

There seems to be a compulsion on the part of some of our British contributors to rewrite 20th-century American history in the form of Interzone fictions. Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne reimagined the American 1950s (and, in particular, the life story of Buddy Holly) in their IZ 43 story, "In the Air." Now, in this issue, Paul J. McAuley rewrites the story of blues-singer Robert Johnson and imagines a black Civil Rights movement of the 1940s. In our time-line it never happened.

Why this compulsion to re-invent America – particularly on the part of UK writers? It's not necessarily a passing fad, for J.G. Ballard could be said to have led the way in his science-fiction novel of ten years ago, *Hello America*. Neil Ferguson's 1983 short story "The Monroe Doctrine" (IZ 5) was another harbinger. Messrs Newman and Byrne have recently put the finishing touches to their prequel to "In the Air." It will appear in *Aboriginal SF* next month (the Interzone swap issue), and will be reprinted in IZ 48 the month after. It's entitled "Ten Days That Shook the World," and it deals with the second American revolution, the one which took place in 1917 and was led by Eugene Debs, John Reed and other socialist workers.

### THE DECLINE AND FALL OF AMERICA?

Perhaps the specific theme of the latest Newman/Byrne opus gives us a clue as to why this re-invention of America has been taking place in the British science-fictional imagination. It represents an imaginative surge which has been cued by the end of the Cold War, the crumbling of the Soviet Union, and by the alarming way in which the erstwhile "imperial" United States, with Britain as a faithful appendage, have been left twisting in the wind and searching the desert sands for an enemy... (It's 15th January 1991 as I write this, and I do not know what terrible events will or will not take place in the weeks before it sees print.)

The huge change in the world order which has occurred in the past couple of years has made us all realize that things need not always be the same. Indeed, things need not have been as they were in the first place. These are thoughts which are liberating to any sf writer's imagination; hence our recent spate of stories which go back

to tell the tale of America as it should have been – or, rather, as it might have been. These are among the first science-fictional fruits of the post-Cold War era. We hope you find them both thought-provoking and entertaining.

### MORE ON THE INTERZONE/ABORIGINAL SWAP

As mentioned above, and as described in our last editorial, Interzone 47, cover-dated May 1991, will be a "special Aboriginal issue" with contents almost entirely provided by the American magazine. Simultaneously, *Aboriginal's* readers will receive a "special Interzone issue" of their magazine, with fiction, articles, reviews and artwork selected by us. The contents of both these special issues will be reprinted in the following month (that's to say, the stories and articles which would have been in the normal IZ 47 will appear in IZ 48). As explained last time, no regular readers will lose out; and the only persons who may have cause to complain are the few who already have subscriptions to both magazines. If these last inform us of their identity, we shall gladly extend their IZ sub by one issue in compensation.

Why are we doing this? Well, as I said before, the *Aboriginal* swap should be fun for everybody involved – it's an exercise worth taking for its own sweet sake. But apart from that, there are real practical advantages for Interzone. *Aboriginal SF* has a subscription list some 16,000 strong, mainly Americans. All those people will be receiving the contents of a typical issue of IZ (brought to them at *Aboriginal's* expense). Some of them may not like what they see, but we trust that many of them will be sufficiently impressed to want to subscribe to future issues of IZ. Hence this little exercise may do wonders for our American reputation and circulation. It may even win Hugo and Nebula Award nominations for some of our authors, such as Newman & Byrne, Paul McAuley, Greg Egan, Eric Brown and Nicola Griffith (all of whom will have stories in the "Interzone issue" of *Aboriginal*).

So we trust that our regular readers will understand our eagerness to participate in this highly unusual swap. We also hope that you will enjoy the sample contents of *Aboriginal SF* which we shall be bringing you next month; and, if you do so, that you will

consider placing a subscription with that magazine. See our "Coming Next Month" box on page 74 for further details of what's in store.

### JIM AND THE WOMEN

J.G. Ballard's new novel, to be published by Collins on 19th September 1991, is entitled *The Kindness of Women*. Little more is known about it at present, except that it's a quasi-sequel to *Empire of the Sun* and concerns (the fictional) Jim's experiences after he returned from China to Britain in the 1940s. I understand that the action of the novel covers a considerable span of time, right up to the 1980s. It is not science fiction. The title intrigues, but we shall have to wait for elucidation. Meanwhile, here are a few texts to ponder:

"Watching her, Ransom reflected that however isolated a man might be, women at least remained his companions, but an isolated woman was isolated absolutely" – *The Drought*, 1965.

"The nurses who emptied my urinal and worked my bowels with their enema contraption... who cleansed the pus from the dressings on my scalp and wiped my mouth with their hard hands – these starved women in all their roles reminded me of those who attended my childhood, commissionaires guarding my orifices" – *Crash*, 1973.

"His reflex of chivalry and good sense had been no match for this posse of middle-aged avenging angels. Uneasily, he thought: careful, Laing, or some stockbroker's wife will unman you as expertly as she de-stones a pair of *avocados*" – *High-Rise*, 1975.

### MAGAZINES RECEIVED

Shortage of space forced us to cease running a "Magazines Received" column a few issues ago. However, I promised to bring occasional news of other British sf/fantasy magazines and when it seemed appropriate. One sad piece of news is that the fantasy magazine *Amaranth* has folded after just two issues – so the editor, Rob Jeffrey, informed me in a sorrowful phone call a few days ago. This is a pity, as one would have thought a pure fantasy magazine could find a market among all those who consume heroic-fantasy paperbacks with such avidity (see the item which follows, on last year's "fastsellers" in the UK). Had we the

money, the energy or the time, we might try to produce such a magazine ourselves. But it's unlikely. Although *IZ* is primarily a science-fiction magazine, we shall continue to cater to the fantasy audience from time to time – as witness, this month's "Elric" story by **Michael Moorcock**.

The other magazine news is that our main would-be competitor, the small-press sf journal **BRR**, has gained news-trade distribution via Diamond-Euro-press, the distributors who handle *Interzone*. I wish editor Chris Reed and his magazine the best of luck. Newsstand distribution is a risky business, and he is unlikely to meet with any great measure of immediate success; but if his magazine hangs in there, and keeps on improving its quality as it has done in the past year, then it could well become the first real rival to *IZ* that we will have seen in our nine years of publication. (Several others have promised to match us, but so far all have failed to establish themselves – latest news on the "promises, promises" front is that the much-delayed **R.E.M.**, magazine may be out before this issue of *IZ*, once more under the on/off joint editorship of Arthur Straker and Andrew [Psyko Candy] Coates; but we'll believe it when we see it.)

## HAMILTON'S 1990 FAST-SELLERS

We statistics freaks have again been done a great service by **Alex Hamilton**, who published his annual list of UK paperback top sellers in the *Guardian* newspaper on 10th January 1991. Here is a sub-list drawn from his list of 100 fast-selling paperbacks (all of which sold over 100,000 copies in UK editions during 1990). It consists of those titles which can be claimed as science fiction, fantasy or horror:

1. *The Dark Half* by Stephen King (NEL; 514,381 gross sale)
2. *Midnight* by Dean R. Koontz (Headline; 269,838)
3. *The Diamond Throne* by David Eddings (Grafton; 194,857)
4. *Pyramids* by Terry Pratchett (Corgi; 162,114)
5. *Guards! Guards!* by Terry Pratchett (Corgi; 140,336)
6. *Sorceress of Darshiva* by David Eddings (Corgi; 126,265)
7. *Prince of the Blood* by Raymond E. Feist (Grafton; 119,426)
8. *Duncton Found* by William Horwood (Arrow; 117,187)
9. *Truckers* by Terry Pratchett (Corgi; 112,164)
10. *Nemesis* by Isaac Asimov (Bantam; 108,338)

Excluded from the above select list of ten are all the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles spinoff books, at least half a dozen of which reached the top-

hundred list. Also excluded are several borderline horror novels (*The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris [Mandarin; 251,238] or fabulations (Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco [Picador; 242,290]). As usual, the results are rather depressing for science-fiction purists: only Isaac Asimov made the list with a novel which is unquestionably sf. Once more, the relative mass-market popularity of horror and fantasy is proven beyond a doubt.

(David Pringle)

# Interaction

Dear Editors:

All thanks for *Interzone* 43, and for publishing Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne's "In the Air" – perhaps the most enjoyable and thought-provoking "what if" story you've yet published. (I've been reading since No. 1.) The story was simply that: enjoyable, easy-going, yet setting off a mass of questions... Three people not mentioned in the story came to mind.

There was no mention of the *Chicago Tribune*, as edited by the gifted and unstable Theodore Dreiser. Perhaps its previous owner Colonel Robert R. McCormick had gone to work for the propaganda department of the U.S.S.A., or had been liquidated in the 1912 Revolution...

What was Sinclair "Red" Lewis doing? Had he won his Nobel prize, the first ever for a citizen of the U.S.S.A., and, after his untimely death, had numerous towns and streets named after him...? And what of Jack London? Perhaps his novel *The Iron Heel* was not acceptable to the new order, and he really was poisoned in 1916...

I hope that Messrs Newman and Byrne will produce further stories of the U.S.S.A. There's the whole saga of the Third Revolution, the reaction against atheism led by the Revd Dr James Carter, and put down by the secular humanist playwright O.S. Card...

Once again, thanks for a great magazine.

**John Howard (Revd.)**  
Bracknell, Berks.

**Editor:** Most of the historical figures you mention feature in Newman & Byrne's prequel to "In the Air," coming up in *Interzone* 48 (and *Aboriginal SF*). It's called "Ten Days That Shook the World," and it also has Dashiell Hammett, Ernest Hemingway, Harry Houdini and Annie Oakley in lead roles. Don't miss it.

Dear Editors:

I have just finished reading "In the Air" and I just want to say how good it is. At first I was worried about another story which re-writes the past. But as I read on I was caught in its web of excellent characters and fine sense of history.

It made valid political points without beating the reader over the head.

It's only (minor) soft spot was towards the end when Thatcher was dragged in all of a sudden. Too heavy-handed, I think. But, even so, the story was great. The best I've read in your magazine. And, thank God, it wasn't full of esoteric references to quantum mechanics. Makes a pleasant change in itself.

**M. Nash**  
London

Dear Editors:

Is Crispin Keith (letters, issue 43) trying to be funny, or what?

I would suggest that a workable definition of sf is "a drama about, or set in the milieu of, change brought about by science." If readers are not interested in that, there's a vast selection of good, entertaining, intelligent, and thought-provoking fiction outside the sf genre. On the other hand, if sf does not deal with new (and, at present, "obscure") science and technologies then who will?

There is a place for soft science in sf – sociology, psychology and so on – and indeed it has been handled magnificently by some writers, notably Ballard. Similarly, there has been some real dress in the hard science camp. But there has to be a balance. Does Mr Keith believe that the future is going to be different, say, politically (e.g. altered beyond belief by radical Kinnockism) but exactly the same in terms of technology? Has Mr Keith thought about what technology has already done to/for people (let alone society) – contact lenses, hearing aids, prostheses, cosmetic surgery, life-saving surgery? I imagine optics and sound amplification were pretty obscure at one time.

Mr Keith appears to be the master of the sweeping statement. I'd like to ask: what's macho about science? What is obscure about the quantum theory? (It's over half a century old.) How do you know that the bulk of "intelligent" readers are female – have you conducted a poll?

Philistinism intrigues me. I've worked and studied both in a scientific and in an artistic environment. When in the former, I have participated in trips to the theatre, conversations about Hemingway, Lawrence, Marquez, exchanges of books of Bruegel and Magritte, and exchanges of records of Bach, Faure, Elgar. Whereas at art

Continued on page 62





# CROSSROADS

by  
Paul J McAuley

**T**he first time Turner heard Robert Johnson play was to a vast crowd in Washington D.C.; December 5th 1945, the night the desegregation bill went through, six months before Johnson's assassination. The second was a routine archive trip to 1936, a little Mississippi delta town called Frye's Point, and it was something else.

Afterwards, Turner hung around outside, an anonymous still point in the crowd that, slow as molasses, dispersed into the humid May night. Johnson's music still thrilled inside him. Songs that had dwindled to little more than titles in charred files from the fire-bombed office of an obscure record company, a few scratchy recordings, had one after the other bloomed like flames in the sweaty juke joint, so much sound from one man and one guitar thrilling through the silent crowd, through Turner, that he doubted his state-of-the-art Soviet recorder could have captured one tenth of the reality. Turner had once played a little guitar himself, enough to know that what the old bluesmen said about Robert Johnson was true. Even before the New York concerts, the

years in prison on a trumped-up murder charge, his letters and his protest songs, the Freedom Marches and the Segregation Riots, near-canonization after his assassination, Robert Johnson had been something else.

**M**ost everyone had gone now. The dark street was empty but for Turner and a half dozen or so men who hung around the mouth of the alley at the side of the juke joint. They were passing around a pint bottle wrapped to the neck in a brown paper bag, talking in low voices.

Turner felt them looking askance at him. The stranger in a dark city suit (it hung oddly loose around him, and the suspenders which kept up the trousers were creasing his shoulders), a clean white shirt (soaked in sweat that did not cool him in the humid night air), polished two-tone shoes (which pinched like hell). The space under his collarbone, where the grain of Americium hung suspended in its Oppenheimer pinch, tingled. Turner should have cut out and closed the Loop when the music was over. That



was the way it worked, get in, do the job, get out. Don't give the paradoxes any chance. But Turner had heard truths about himself in Johnson's songs, they'd wakened hopes and blasted desires he'd thought safely buried. What he had to do before he closed the Loop was meet the man who'd made the songs that had reamed him to his soul.

So Turner strolled over to the men, casual as he could, his pulse in his throat, his voice sounding funny when he asked where Robert Johnson was.

One of the men said, "He's still in back here."

Another added, "He's with a woman right now, boy. Comes to women, why, Bobby Johnson's like a snake in a henhouse."

Someone else wanted to know who was asking. Turner gave his cover story of being a talent scout, named a large New York record company. It was sort of true.

The man shook his head. "Bobby Johnson, he already done got himself a deal."

The first man said, "Yeah, my Annie's cousin, lives up in Chicago? She done wrote she heard the Terra-

plane Blues on the radio there. Bobby Johnson, he's fixin' to be famous." This was the oldest of the half dozen, his face a map of wrinkles like drying mud, his eyeballs yellow as ivory, his nappy hair salt and pepper. He peered at Turner through the close gloom and said, "You way too late, Mr New York."

Someone said out of the darkness, "I heard he was on the radio in Detroit, too, singin' spirituals. Shit, he been round this country a couple three times now."

The old man said to Turner, "What you doin', running errands for the Man, boy? Never did hear of a gentleman of colour working for no record company before. They say our white boys down here are mean, but they just Southern crackers next to Yankees."

"Race records are a big thing in New York," Turner said, already in deeper than he'd intended. "Robert Johnson, now, we're very interested in him."

"New York nothin'," the old man said, "you go tell Mr White that down here on the Delta is home of the Blues, noplase else. Why, I play harmonica myself. I get the Blues real bad sometimes."

A couple of the men laughed. Someone else said,

quietly, "Yeah, but Bobby Johnson, he got 'em worse of all."

"He got a mojo hand, no mistake." Burly and running to fat, in pressed bib overalls, this man took the bagged bottle. He added, "They say he got Legba lookin to him." The bottle sloshed as he took a swallow; he wiped his lips on the back of his hand, offered it to Turner.

Warm whisky fumes burned into Turner's chest. He managed not to cough, passed the bottle to someone else. The little group was coming alive, interrupting each other as they told Turner that Johnson had made a voodoo pact to get to play the way he did, that it was true enough when he sang he had a hellhound on his tail, that he really had met the devil at the crossroads.

"Only it was ol Legba himself, givin the boy a lesson in the Blues in exchange for his soul."

"Legba, shit. It was Mr Sammy you mean," someone said, and there was a hush as if an angel had passed overhead.

The old man said, "Well I don't know how much of that be true, but I do know one time Bobby Johnson couldn't play a lick to save himself. I got the story straight from Son House. Bobby Johnson, he could play harmonica right enough, but he was always fixin after playin gitar. Hung out every joint and dance and country picnic there was, pesterin the players to give him a chance, though he was so bad it wasn't even funny. Son House said he was famous for it, remembers a time it happened to him down in Missouri. Anyhow, Bobby Johnson went away maybe a year, and I don't know if he went to the crossroads with ol' Legba or not, but Son House he told me when Johnson came back he was carryin a gitar and he asked for a spot like old times. Well, Son gave it him and went outside before Bobby Johnson drove the crowd out, but he said that time it was all changed. That time, the music he heard Bobby Johnson make put the hair on his head to standin."

It had the air of a story told many times. There was a silence, and then someone said reverentially, "That's the truth."

The old man said, "Son House told me Johnson told him a man called Ike Zimmerman taught him how to play, but what truth's in that I don't rightly know."

Turner, whose first name was Isaac, felt an airy thrill. It was as if he was suddenly resonating with time and place, something that had never happened to him before. For the first time since he'd been brought back from the Peace Corps he felt alive again, his youthful restlessness, the spirit that had sent him scattershotting the past century and then half-way around the world, coming back in a rush.

There was the sound of a motor, oddly muffled in the humid night air, and the men around Turner fell silent. Then someone said, "Shit, here comes ol Sheriff Wiley," and the group hustled back into the alley's pitch darkness. The old man put a hand in the crook of Turner's elbow, said confidentially, "Don't know about where you come from, Mr New York, but our law here is meaner than a hog with its tail on fire."

The ratchety motor grew louder. Light dawned at the alley's mouth, a patrol car's big yellow headlights. Turner glimpsed the white blur of a face leaning at the side-window, and then the patrol car was past.

Turner could feel his pulse beating in his neck. Last thing he needed was a white policeman asking him what he was doing with a tape recorder that wouldn't be built for thirty years.

A door opened in back of the alley and the men turned as light fell on them. A tall skinny man stepped through, silhouetted in the act of setting a fedora on his head. It was Robert Johnson. He squinted at the group, looked directly at Turner.

"Why Ike," he said. "You come back. I always wondered if you would."

Johnson soon disengaged himself from the hangers-on, somehow acquiring a crumpled pack of cigarettes and the nearly empty pint of whisky in the process. He took a long swallow, lit a cigarette and held it jauntily in the corner of his mouth. "Well all right," he said with satisfaction, and exhaled a rifle of smoke.

He and Turner were standing underneath the juke joint's sign. Bugs beat around the light; across the rutted street, fireflies winked on and off amongst the weeds of an empty lot, codes as unfathomable as this meeting.

"Been a long time," Robert Johnson said. "You tell me how I did in there. I was good, wasn't I?"

"Sure." Turner was thinking that Johnson had mistaken him for someone else, someone with the same first name. When Johnson spoke again, Turner knew just who.

"Never forgot what you taught me, and never did figure out why you did it. One of the boys said you were a talent scout. That just a line you spinnin, or you in some other business now?"

"I just came to hear you play. You were...fine."

"I guess you don't have to tell me where you been. You look good though, Ike. Not a year older. Me, I been through some good times and some bad times. Right now it looks like good times up ahead."

"I heard some of it in your songs. Some of my times, too."

"Sure I tell it in my songs. Got no other way." Johnson lit another cigarette. His fingers were so long they seemed to run back to his wrist. He wore sharply creased pinstripe pants, suspenders, a white shirt open down to his navel. His shoes shone so Turner could see it even in the lamplit darkness. He looked both easy and dangerous. He said, "I get to thinkin sometimes that there's somethin missing in there, maybe I need to make the beat better. I don't know, louder, more insistent. I remember when I was a little kid, down around Banks, the cotton fields there? Way the coppers sang the old worksongs as they picked. I try to put that in, but my ol gitar ain't enough."

Turner managed to shrug. He was in deep now, so deep he didn't know which way was up.

Robert Johnson laughed. "I guess them ol days are gone, teacher. I guess I got to figure my own way now. But it's hard, you know? Had good women and bad, had money and lost it. The days just run by me, it seems, can't seem to catch hold of anything that lasts."

"Your songs will last," Turner said. It was all he could tell him.

"Oh yes." Johnson said it so softly it was hardly louder than the last rattle of smoke he exhaled into the darkness. He looked at Turner with hooded eyes.



One lid drooped lower than the other. He said, "You heard I got recorded? It's gonna happen again, I got to get me to San Antonio fore June is out."

"Sure." Frankel would be there, aiming his equipment at a hotel room made over into recording studio.

Johnson flicked away the glowing cigarette butt. He said, "Real nice seein you this one more time, Ike, and I'm wonderin if you can help me out here. I was so busy with a lady friend I missed gettin paid, I'll have to wait til mornin. Meanwhile me and my lady friend are lookin for a room to stay, only we lacks the necessary you understand..."

**T**urner gave Robert Johnson the little money he'd been issued and crossed to the vacant lot, where he used his magnet to break the Oppenheimer pinch. The flash decay of the grain of Americium that had been caught inside, an element that wouldn't exist until it was created by the Fermi Lab's cyclotron in the mid '50s, was the hook by which the Loop machinery reeled him back from still-segregated mid-Depression Mississippi to 1963.

Washington D.C. Early spring, the Potomac pewter in rain-dulled light, cold rain drifting across the Mall's acres of grass, hanging heavy on the blossoms of the cherry trees and clinging to uniforms of the marching bands practising beneath them.

Nearly thirty years separated the ends of the Loop: it might have been a thousand. In 1963 there were two blacks in the supreme court, a dozen in the Senate, more than fifty in Congress. The president of Harvard was black; so was the Secretary of the Interior and the commander of the US Army Air Force Corps. And the first black President, Adam Clayton Powell, was in the White House. Hastily sworn in on a plane a year ago, when Kennedy had been shot an hour after starting his run at a second term, all his dreams of a newer stronger America, an America that finally would count in the world, spilling out with his brains on the tiles of that kitchen in the Ambassador Hotel while his widow knelt over him in a cross-fire of flashguns. Powell was a good man, no question, and the first black President counted for something any way you looked at it. But Powell had been Senator for Harlem and his concerns were for expanding the Welfare and Federal Work programme budgets, not the international scene. Kennedy's finest legacy, the Peace Corps, had been suspended – feed our brothers and sisters in Harlem, in Watts, in Roxbury, white and black and coffee-coloured, and their children will be strong enough to really help the world, Powell had said – and that was what had brought Turner back from the refugee camps in Madagascar to his old job as a Loop rider, held open for him since he'd dropped out two years before.

Most of Turner's friends thought that was why he spoke out against Powell's policies; only a few knew that he had always been an interventionist, that his father had died in Mexico in '49 during the disintegration of the support for the Christian Democrat guerrillas against the Marxist government, twenty thousand Americans lost and Turner's father one of them. America had had a chance to become a power then, and had blown it, and with the disbanding of the Peace Corps it looked as if it would never come round again. For all her size and wealth, America was a sleepy backwater compared to the British Empire

or the Communist Axis. Powell seemed set on making sure that was all she ever would be.

The Loop machinery was at the Physics department of Georgetown University; the research facilities, the stacks of recordings and photographs and data gathered by riders, the costume and prop stores, the briefing and debriefing rooms, were hidden in the labyrinths of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, wedged between Anthropology and Entomology. They'd been moved there after Hoover and the watchmaker conspiracy in the tangled aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, when the Loop and its explosive potential for changing rather than recording the recent past had become something of an embarrassment. Turner had come back in the middle of a series of cut-backs, taken on again only because so many riders had been forced to resign under the cloud of FBI complicity.

Turner was driven from Georgetown's campus to the Smithsonian still in his baggy suit. He changed and deposited his recordings, and underwent debriefing with Frankel and the rest of the team, sweating with guilt on a hard chair under buzzing fluorescent circles, marching music sounding faintly from the Mall. He did not mention that he had waited to meet Johnson, the first time he had ever lied about a Loop, even if it was a lie by omission. And he never did talk about it with anyone, not even Frankel, for all that it weighed so heavily. Johnson had known him, yet before that moment they had never met. Or not that Turner knew. It could be that he would Loop to some earlier part of Johnson's life, but riders tried to avoid that kind of circular thinking, and so Turner tried to set the mystery aside. If it had happened it would happen, no use brooding over it.

**S**pring wore into summer. Turner Looped all the way back to pre-earthquake San Francisco, close to the limit set by energy dispersion. While he was gathering data for some Professor from Berkeley who was studying immigration patterns and interracial tensions, he got beaten up by a gang of Chinese and was put on light duties while he recovered. But Turner chaffed at doing correlation work in the record stacks; he was a rider, not a historian, and besides, the restlessness which had led him to the Peace Corps, awakened by Robert Johnson's music, would not easily sleep. So he took a month's vacation and spent it at the family farm, mowing the fields which his proud stubborn frail mother really should give up. When he came back the first person to knock on his office door was Frankel, bearing half a dozen LP records. They were the transcribed recordings of early-period Robert Johnson, Turner's own juke joint recording among them.

The LPs were newfangled '33s, and Frankel had brought along a record player. A wiry man the same age as Turner, with a shock of prematurely grey hair, he had been promoted to team leader while Turner had been with the Peace Corps, and was still unsure how to treat his old colleague. He hardly said a word as he fussed with the player's complicated tone-arm, and Turner smoked two cigarettes and looked out of the window at the office workers sunbathing away their lunch break on the Mall's browning grass, suddenly nervous.

"I think we're about ready," Frankel said at last. "Your recordings were very clear, but of course you're a good field worker, Turner. And all in all it turned out very well, except for the attempt to bug the second hotel session."

"You used what, infra-red vibratometry?"

"The first time it was fine. The second, 1936, the drapes were drawn, the sound was too muffled for anything but lyric transcription. Columbia want to put out some of the recordings, did I tell you that?"

"Really? That's good, Frankel. Who gets the money?"

"Not me. The Government, and I guess Johnson's relatives. I have a release I need you to sign later. But now: hush."

Crackle and hiss, the dull murmur of a crowd, suddenly slashed by guitar chords, a loose rhythm strummed over a counterbeat on the G string, the rocking rhythm of a train. And Johnson's voice, aching and tender:

Well, I went down to the station, with a suitcase in my hand...

And Turner was back in the juke joint, came to himself only when his forgotten cigarette stung his fingers and he dropped it on the office's worn institutional carpet.

Frankel smiled. "He was something else, right?"

"Oh yes..." And Turner said no more, for on record Johnson still sang.

**T**urner played and replayed the discs, played tracks of the lost songs back to back with the familiar protest songs on which Johnson had built his fame, the songs that had helped lay the ground for desegregation, the songs hundreds of thousands had sung in unison on Freedom Marches across America, the songs half a million people had sung right there in Washington D.C. the night the bill for desegregation had gone through. Turner remembered. He had been six years old. His father had lifted him onto the wide shoulders of his Army wool overcoat, where young Isaac Turner had swayed above a sea of packed heads receding into darkness and sleet flurries towards the high stage from which Robert Johnson's steely voice rang out...and the next year Turner's father had gone to Mexico and had vanished there.

Turner remembered, and played the lost songs again, trying to figure out why they sounded so much more powerful than the later works. There was the beat, and the way Johnson sounded like two or three people playing at once, but that wasn't it, or wasn't it entirely. There was something else, some vital spark the protest songs lacked. A directness, straight from one heart to another. If the protest songs had relied on familiarity as much as their message (and how many in the crowd that night had dwelt on the words as they sang with Robert Johnson, him elevated on a high stage, alone in crossed spotlights) how much better would they have sounded if they had the drive of the younger Johnson's songs of love and loss and hate?

At the least, Turner thought, brooding in his two-room walk-up, it might have brought on the changes more quickly, allowed America to enter the war and share in victory over the Nazis, or give her the space

needed for a full commitment to the counter-revolution in Mexico. No debacle, perhaps a world role after all. Einstein had said that such changes were impossible, that time's arrow was set in only one direction, the past fixed and invariant. To visit the past was not to change it, but to become part of its preordained pattern. No one had doubted Einstein, or at least officially, for otherwise the Loop facility would not have been built. But then Hoover had tried to use it for his own ends, and while no one was clear if it had been a Loop rider who had killed Oswald or not, in that crowded L.A. courtroom, everyone who worked the Loop was damned sure something had gone down. There had always been plenty of rumours that inadvertent changes had been made: why else were precautions so stringent, training for the Loop so elaborate?

Frankel had once tried to explain to Turner the Many Worlds theory, which Einstein had spent the last half of his life trying to disprove. But talking about quantum physics gave Turner a headache. Frankel had paraphrased Paul Dirac to the effect that anyone who really understood quantum physics would crap their pants, and Turner had said then in that case he wouldn't bother to try, he already had enough trouble staying in period without worrying about stuff like that.

If Loop riders weren't historians, nor were they physicists. And so Turner could dream in his ignorance that it was possible, that some small change could tip the momentum of the past into a new, better course. After all, he'd met someone who *had* changed the world, and in turn the meeting had changed him.

Summer wore into fall. Columbia issued an LP set of Robert Johnson's early songs and for a while they were everywhere. By now they were as familiar to Turner as his own name. It might have rested there if some group of dissident musicians in Britain hadn't taken up those old songs and made them into something new.

Before the year was out, the group, the Quarrymen, were the most famous men in Britain. They called themselves rock and rollers. Two guitarists, an electric bass player and a drummer, belting out a crude but vigorous mutation of the rhythm and blues that had been popular in Chicago before the Marches. The music struck deep into the hearts of Britain's disenfranchised youth. For all the Empire's solidity, for all its wealth, there were literally millions starving in the Mother country itself, denied work because South African and Indian slave labour was so cheap. There were riotous scenes at Quarrymen concerts, and a dozen imitations sprang up to be idolized in turn: Blues Incorporated; Blues by Six; the High Numbers (who quickly changed their name to the Who); Little Boy Blue and the Blues Boys (who just as quickly became the Mannish Boys).

In the States, their music was available only on incredibly expensive imported discs, but Turner bought everything, even got hold of a bootleg tape of a Quarrymen concert: the audio quality was very poor, and the band's playing was almost drowned by the insensate screaming of their fans, but he heard again the thing that Johnson's singing had sparked in him. It was this electricity that had given Britain's lost generation something of their own, an impetus that the

government (too slow to stamp out the movement at birth, their random banning of concerts now seemed petty and foolish) could not take away. Turner saw how it could be done. When he hunted out his old National guitar, he knew why Robert Johnson had recognized him that time.

**T**here were just two times and places where Turner could be sure of meeting the young untutored Johnson. He lucked out on the first, outside a little town in South Missouri, a humid headachy August day in 1931.

Someone had thrown a rent party at their shack. It stood in a weedy lot on a gullied rise, one of dozens straggling along a dirt road: a tin roof, unpainted wood walls, all raised on bricks to keep the termites out. It had rained earlier and promised to rain again, and the shack was crowded out, people spilling over the porch, standing on the muddy ground around the windows while Son House played inside. Others clustered under the big shade tree where 'shine was being sold and a mess of catfish was stewing in a big black kettle.

Turner sat on damp grass a ways off. His guitar was with him, in a canvas sack. He'd seen the much younger Johnson go inside the shack an hour before, knew he'd soon come out humiliated, after having borrowed a guitar from Son House and made a fool of himself. Turner had verified the story from House himself, and from another bluesman House had said had also been there.

Turner had been waiting all day, had had plenty of time to wonder at what he was doing there in the Delta, instead of New York two years ago, where he was supposed to be. The Loop operator, a friend of Turner's, had been easy enough to bamboozle, but Turner knew that the altered destination would show up in the records, and he didn't know if he could get to them if this didn't work out.

But right at that moment Turner didn't care. He was here to teach Robert Johnson how to rock and roll. He was here to remake history into something better.

Turner was so keyed up that he had to keep going off in the bushes to take a leak, and he almost missed the moment when Robert Johnson came down the steps, shouldering through the people with his head down, his swagger broken-backed. Turner picked up his guitar and headed after Johnson as the young man set off down the red clay road.

The road curved around the edge of an untidy cemetery, and Turner cut through the crowd of leaning crosses. Twilight, the sky heavy with purple clouds: a storm coming from somewhere, an omen. The road was crossed by another at the cemetery's far corner, and it was there that Turner caught up with the young Robert Johnson, meeting him beneath an old magnolia tree just as the first heavy drops of rain began.

**F**our weeks went by, mostly on the road, as Turner taught young Robert Johnson the hard-driving rhythmic techniques Turner had heard the older Johnson use. Turner was careful to use only old standards in his teaching, for where would the song come from if Johnson learned something Turner had heard him play? Turner's own adopted name was



enough to give him a headache. He called himself Isaac Zimmerman, of course, because that was the name of Johnson's legendary teacher, it was the name by which Robert Johnson would know him, five years up the line. But who had chosen the name? There was a very young, very obscure white folk singer by that name in Turner's own time...but Turner had only found that out because he'd been trying to trace Johnson's mythical teacher, not realizing that all the time he was on the track of himself.

But there was no time to wonder about physics. While Turner taught him how to play blues guitar, nineteen years old Robert Johnson taught Turner how to ride the blinds. They were two particles in a sea of restless particles; it seemed half the nation was on the move in the dog days of the Depression. But even at the bottommost level there were separate societies of black and white. Alongside the tracks, in boggy hollows, in junk-filled clearings in shabby suburban woods, there were always at least two campfires burning, or so it seemed. Turner and Johnson sang for their supper, and sometimes the white bums would hang at the edges of the black encampment, transfixed by the music – but it was not they who fed the singers.

Four weeks. It was not enough time. Turner managed to teach Johnson the rudiments of his craft, but although Bobby was an avid pupil, practising twelve hours a day until his extraordinarily long fingers bled on the steel strings of the National guitar (which had been Turner's father's, who was alive and not yet married, and, strange to think, younger than Turner himself), he was still only a shadow of what he would become.

Johnson knew how much he had to learn, and sometimes he would weep in frustration, but even as the tears ran down his cheeks he still played, driven by something that awed Turner. At nineteen he'd lived through more than men three times his age: he'd had three stepfathers; his wife had died in childbirth. He burned to redeem something from that world of hurt. If only there was enough time, Turner knew he could teach Johnson the brutally simple rhythms that drove the rock and roll of the Quarrymen. But in the end there was not enough time.

They rode a boxcar into the Big Easy, and Turner spared a few of his antique dollars to pay a week's rent on a room. There was no furniture but a couple of mattresses and a broken chair, and roaches big as sparrows emerged after sundown, spreading wings and whirling into walls, bemused by flickering candlelight. But it was a quiet place in the city's roar where Johnson could practice.

He was getting better, Turner was sure: it wasn't just hopeful thinking. Trouble was, the city held too many distractions. One night Turner came back to the room to find Johnson and the guitar gone; Bobby turned up the next day and admitted he'd pawned the guitar to get a night in a cathouse.

"I got needs, Mr Zimmerman," he said, his face turned to the wall, his narrow shoulders hunched. He'd bought a clean white shirt, too; sweat mapped a continent on his back. "I got needs same as any man, I guess. Sometimes they're just plain stronger than me, that's the truth."

He was so comically contrite that Turner couldn't chastise him. It wasn't the money, anyway – Turner

carried a dozen gold rings ready for pawning when the need arose – it was the waste of time. He redeemed the ticket on the guitar and told Johnson he'd done enough practising. It was time he tried playing a streetcorner on guitar instead of mouth-harp.

So Robert Johnson made his debut on an intersection of Canal Street in the middle morning of a hot heavy September day. Turner hung about in a storefront across the corner, watched the small crowd gather, heard snatches of Johnson's hard-edged yet trembling tenor above the chugging of black automobiles, the rattle of streetcars. Mostly, Johnson stayed close to the small repertoire he'd established, from *Heart Made of Stone* and *Stack O'Lee* through *Minglewood Blues* to *Birmingham Jail* and *Matchbox Blues*, making a stab at Bing Crosby's latest hit along the way. But a couple of lines floating through the gap between a streetcar and a model T raised the hairs on the back of Turner's neck:

*I've mistreated my baby, and I can't see no reason why,*

*Well, I've mistreated my baby, can't see no reason why,*

*Anytime I think about it, I just wring my hands and cry...*

It was a stray verse from Johnson's late repertoire, ringing out clear in the gathering heat of that New Orleans morning. It drew Turner from his doorway to the kerb, his heart lifting. And someone came up to him: it was Frankel, looking incredibly young in a wide-labelled chalkstripe suit and a wide-brimmed boater. Frankel said, "Come on now, Isaac, I believe it's time to go."

"I'm not done here," Turner said. He was trembling, but he didn't know whether from fear or shock. "I've some teaching still to do. He isn't much beyond being a good Blues singer, and he has to be something else."

"He's an extraordinary Blues singer, or will be. And that's all he will be, Isaac. You haven't changed anything yet, and we're taking you back before you can. I don't know what you were planning, but it can't be allowed to work."

"If you've been here a while you'll know why," Turner said. He was talking too fast, stumbling over words. He knew this would be his only chance to explain himself. "Here and now I'm just another nigger. I could get thrown in jail, just talking to a white man like you here on the street. What I'm doing is bringing the end of segregation closer, ten years ahead of time. When I'm done with Johnson he'll be singing in Carnegie Hall all right, but in just one or two years from now, not ten. And then when the European War comes, America will have space to choose sides, space to find her place in the world, Frankel!"

"America has its place," Frankel said. "And they won't be ready for Robert Johnson in New York until they are ready. Nothing you can do can change that. It's time to close your Loop. More than time."

"I don't suppose you're alone."

Frankel's glasses flashed full of sunlight as he shook his head. "I'm not. And they won't treat you as kindly, Isaac."

Frankel steered Turner back into the doorway. He had a magnet in his hand. Just before he clapped it over Turner's Oppenheimer pinch, Turner looked back for a last glimpse of Robert Johnson. But a street-



car was rattling by, and he couldn't even hear the music.

There was a trial. It was held in camera, and nothing got out to the press. The government didn't want a repetition of the Hoover scandal. Turner was sentenced to ten years, served his time in an open prison. It wasn't too bad. Turner adjusted to it with a Loop rider's ease. That's what Loop riders mostly were, not historians or physicists but actors, chameleons. He had to work on the farm or in the machine shop, but he had a cell to himself, there was TV and a gymnasium, and the library was well-stocked. The food was starchy, but those who could afford it could buy food from outside.

Many did. There were a lot of white-collar offenders, mostly fraud, and a passel of political prisoners from the bad old days when Hoover had tried to take over the government and perhaps erase his own complicity in Kennedy's assassination. Most were lesser minions – Hoover himself was brooding up in Alaska – but there were the two notorious “watchmakers” who had taken over the Loop machinery.

Turner kept his nose clean and got out after only five years. It was 1969. The one-time movie actor Ronald Reagan was in the White House after a landslide victory over Adam Clayton Powell, who in his second term had been discredited by a string of sex scandals. The Soviet Republics had made good Khrushchev's boast of landing men on the moon before the decade was out. The Quarrymen had just split up after their second tour of the States. Lennon had taken up with a Japanese avant-garde artist and applied for American citizenship. The States had its own rock-and-roll scene now, and Lennon declared that it was more real than anything happening in Britain. The spring day Turner was released, a general election in Britain returned the first Labour government in forty years: the day after his victory, the pipe-smoking premier was pictured backstage at a rock-and-roll concert, shaking hands with Paul McCartney and members of the Mannish Boys and the Who.

The next day, Turner was sitting in a plush French restaurant in Alexandria, the preserved Colonial suburb of Washington D.C., talking to an earnest, fresh-faced Army Captain whose name Turner had been given in prison.

The Captain came to the point after they had been served coffee. “We’re very interested in what you tried to do, Mr Turner. We believe it has great potential. If you can help us, we can help you. You’re still a trained Loop rider. You can operate in the field. You know the era.” Which in his rich mid-Western twang he pronounced “error.”

“Are we talking about the 1930s?”

“We certainly wouldn't want you to go back further than that. There's enough potential for paradoxes already.”

The Captain had deep-set green eyes, a boyish crew-cut. His gaze was candid, and his manner was disarmingly frank, but all the same Turner sensed a certain disingenuousness. He sipped his cappuccino, enjoying the tang of sprinkled nutmeg. He'd missed a lot in prison; he wanted to take his time regaining the world. In that sense, he had also learned patience.

And yet he still felt unredeemed, that there was a better life shining before him, if only he could reach out and grasp it.

The Captain mistook Turner's pause. He said, “Of course, you're not the first person to try and use the Loop the way you did. Apart from the watchmaker debacle there have been at least three other unsuccessful attempts.”

“You don't exactly know how many?”

“What were you convicted of? On the record?”

“For misuse of government property. But I'm not sure it was on the record.”

“There you are. That's how these things are handled. Three others, but none of them as subtle as you. One wanted to change the outcome of the Civil War by building tanks for the Confederacy. He got as far as showing Lee his plans, but fortunately Lee thought he was a madman. And then they caught up with him and closed his Loop.”

“They are very careful.”

“Even before the watchmakers, and with good reason. Use of the Loop for historical research is an absolute waste of a unique and powerful resource, one we have been trying to exploit since its development. For all his talk of God not playing dice with the Universe, Einstein knew it could be used as a weapon. So did Slizard and Oppenheimer, and they made darn sure that it wouldn't be. It's our edge over the rest of the world, and only academics are allowed to use it, and for trivial reasons. A terrible waste. Of course, as a weapon it would have to be used subtly. Ideally, we'd send troops back to Mexico, turn the war around, but the power expenditure makes it impossible. What you wanted to do, though, now that was interesting. We are very interested.”

Mexico. Of course they would know about his father. Turner said, feeling that he was leaning above a great drop, “The army? Or someone else?”

“If we can give you the resource, do you need to know?”

Turner had learned a lot of things in prison. He said, “I guess not.”

The Captain said, “America could have had a place in the world, and the way the Loop has been marginalized is the way all of her chances have been squandered. My father served in the Expeditionary Force, the Marines. He was killed in the retreat, won a posthumous Silver Star because his company held back Rivera long enough for the rest of the 2nd division to be properly evacuated. It wasn't the Army that lost the war, it was a failure of political nerve. Now we have someone in the White House who has more nerve than many we've had since. Oh, I'm not saying Powell was a bad President, but he had no international vision.”

“I heard Reagan's speeches, Captain North. We did have TV in prison.”

“Of course you did. Then you heard perhaps how he likened America to a shining city on a hill. An ideal we strive towards. An example for all the world. The communists might be able to put a cosmonaut on the Moon, they might have the edge in electronics at the moment, but they still need American grain to feed their people. And the sun might not set on the Brits, but in England they still have slums dating from Queen Victoria's reign. Our country has great

resources, they should be used by Americans, not traded for Soviet computers or British jet airplanes."

"I remember that speech. And maybe you remember Reagan's speech in *Casablanca*, the final scene at the airport? Where he says he's an American, not a European."

"Rick Blaine said that, not Ronald Reagan. Don't confuse movies with reality, Mr Turner."

"Unlike Reagan, huh?"

"You don't have to like us, but we can be very useful to you, and it would help." North smiled. "Like you, we think that something in Robert Johnson's life may be a critical branch point. Go down one road and you reach here. Go down another, and maybe desegregation occurs later, gives us space to enter the war on the side of the British, before the Yalta Treaty. We'll beat the Nazis, we'll be the world power, big as the Brits or the Russians. Maybe even replacing them. Of course, whether you or I would know it had changed is a bit fuzzy, the scientists aren't agreed on how much carries over. I said we knew about three unsuccessful attempts, who knows how many successful ones there were? We can't know, but the important thing would be that it had changed."

Turner said, "I wanted desegregation to happen earlier, not later."

"The best of all possible worlds. I understand. But we subjected your idea to games-theory analysis, found too many problems with it. It only might have worked. Our scenario is stronger, much stronger. And besides, think about it, Mr Turner, aren't we all of us in this country second-class citizens in the world? Are you an American before anything else?"

"Of course," Turner said, "you could just have the guy later."

The Captain's forehead creased. He said, "It's a viable scenario, certainly. But if we did it and nothing happened and people found out... Would you like to be branded as the killer of the man who became the centre of the Cause?"

"So you're not certain putting a stop to Robert Johnson's fame would make any difference?"

"We can't be certain it's the right branch point. And besides, there's Einstein's theory that history has a certain momentum, it takes a lot to change its course. If not Robert Johnson, maybe some other singer would raise black consciousness. But this is our best shot."

"How do you propose I help, Captain North?"

"Tell me, Mr Turner, just how much influence did you really have over Robert Johnson?"

**R**obert Johnson said, "Now see, Ike, I've done with all this rehearsin. I'm not a Shakespearean actor or any such thing. I play the Blues. Way I do that, is go out and do it."

Turner wiped his face with a handkerchief. It was hot in the empty storefront, the close wet heat of Memphis's summer. "We've been through this already, Bobby. What you're doing here is something so new you have to get it right. It's like a rocket. Either it rushes up and explodes, or it just sits there and no one'll take notice of it."

Robert Johnson sort of leaned on his guitar. Electric cord ran back from the pickup to a buzzing valve amplifier. The cord twitched as Johnson swayed to and fro impatiently. "We can't tell if we got it right

unless we play it to people. And you know I've never been one to fix in one spot too long. I been here two months now, wouldn't have stayed longer than two weeks if you hadn't shown up. What I'm sayin, see, is this idea of yours is good. I like it. But it's time to get it movin. That right, boys?"

Behind him, the drummer started up a slow beat, and the pedal guitar player dragged long bending notes over the top. It was the opening of *Love in Vain*. A couple of the hangers-on began to clap in time in a desultory way. The bassist, a fat balding man, sat to one side, his big woman-shaped instrument keeled at a low angle, its head in his lap. He took a swig from a flat bottle, wiped his lips, watching Robert Johnson and Turner.

Johnson stared at Turner impassively, a flat challenging gaze, and Turner forced himself to swallow his anger. Things weren't going quite as he'd expected. Turner had been Looped to Memphis, where the Army's research had told them Johnson would be blowing the money he'd recently been wired from Vocalion, the last of the fee for laying down more tracks with Don Law the year before. Turner had managed to prize Johnson away from the cronies his money had attracted, get him sober, put the proposition. To Turner's surprise, Johnson had accepted at once; he'd been thinking along the same lines, he'd said, after he'd been through Chicago and heard what was going down there, had wanted to get his own band together, but Vocalion saw him as a Delta Blues singer and that was all he wrote. But if Ike Zimmerman told him to do it, and if Ike Zimmerman had the money...

It had slid together more sweetly than Turner had ever dreamed. They'd found a drummer and a stand-up bassist, had Johnson's guitar modified for electric amplification. The pedal guitar player had been Johnson's idea, put a little country edge in it, he'd said. It was even easier to find a place to rehearse than Turner had anticipated, for there was a thriving black business community in Memphis. Ever since 1914, Boss Crump had used the black vote to get his hand-picked candidates into office; blacks had been given back their franchise, and regularly returned fifty per cent of the poll. Black leaders cooperated with the white political machine in return for favours, and by 1938 a substantial proportion of medical and educational budgets were aimed at blacks, kickbacks kept the black business community prosperous, and the black section had sewers and paved, well-lit streets, even parks and libraries.

So Turner had no trouble renting out an empty store a block away from Beale Street. A couple of payments made sure the local cops kept away. And he made sure too that Johnson didn't get too much money, enough for drinks and women if he wanted, but not too much to subsidize his new-found drinking buddies. Still, that hadn't stopped him getting in trouble once or twice; he'd even been thrown in jail once, beaten up and his guitar smashed after he'd been picked up for vagrancy when playing a street corner for spare change, an old habit Turner couldn't break him of.

Turner said, "You sure you're not in trouble, Bobby. Or one of your women isn't?"

"There's maybe a couple of boyfriends after my ass,

but what's new. Thing is, I got to hear of an offer today. Some white guy wants me to give a concert. In New York."

Turner felt as if his insides had been haled away, as if he was softly falling right were he stood.

Robert Johnson said, "I hear he wants me to go up in a few months. He'll buy me a ticket, put me in a hotel. Have me play the Carnegie Hall. You know it? It's a good place to play?"

"One of the best."

"So I'm thinkin if I should stick to what we're doing, take it out on the road, or if I should stay with what I was. I mean, that's what he wants, this guy, he wants me as Robert Johnson, Delta Blues gitar man. And the best, is what I am, too. But what I'm asking here, Ike, you think I should go?"

Turner's blood softly thrilled, the way it had when he'd heard Robert Johnson play in Frye's Point. Here it was, the place where time's highway might branch: one road leading to jail and the letters and protest songs which had fired the Freedom Marches; the other to war and untold misery and perhaps, just perhaps, to the elevation of America, shining freedom's torch for all the world.

Turner said, "I think we should take this thing of ours on the road," and it was the best performance of his life.

Johnson's face split in a wide grin. "I knew you'd see my way of thinkin," he said, and swaggered off to his band, saying, "All right boys, one more time with feelin'."

And as the band swung into the slow burn of Cross-roads Blues, Turner examined himself, tried to feel the change, the switch. But all he could feel was lost in the music.

**T**he music, the music: oh yes, the music! The tour started badly, the first concert wrecked by an amplifier that blew its valves, Johnson reverting to his solo act and nearly wrecking that too, because he was so nervous. Afterwards he got drunk, and he was still so drunk the next morning Turner had to carry him to the train.

But the next concert everything swung into place. The crowd stood in a trance as Robert Johnson, light hitting him under his chin, led the band into spaces they'd never been before. It ended with a defiant apocalyptic reading of *Hellhound on My Trail*, Johnson singing with the fevered defiance of one who knows he's already damned; while drums and bass drove a ladder of sound his voice climbed to the pedal steel's mocking counterpoint. And in the midst of his tale of betrayal and flight from demons, real or imagined, he tossed off the lines, like looking over his shoulder with tender regret,

*If today was Christmas Eve, if today was Christmas Eve*

*And tomorrow was Christmas Day*

*If today was Christmas Eve*

*And tomorrow was Christmas Day*

*Ah, wouldn't we have a time, babe?*

And then the drums came down, and drove his voice into darkness. And when the lights came up the crowd stood there for a long minute, before they remembered to clap. But Johnson was already gone.

He wasn't backstage and he wasn't in the smelly



little dressing room either, when Turner went to look for him. Someone else was waiting there, though. A tall lithe man with a shaven scalp, his skin so dark it looked blue-black in the yellow light of the unshaded bulb. He uncoiled from the chair and bounded to his feet before Turner could ask who he was, put a hand on Turner's chest, over the place where the Oppenheimer pinch was lodged, said, "Don't be foolish, or I'll Loop you without a thought."

The man's gaze locked with Turner's. In the distance, the crowd was still shouting out for an encore. Turner said, "What did you do with Bobby?"

"Robert Johnson? Why, nothing at all. And I won't, as long as you keep him from New York."

What Turner felt was not fear, but a kind of weak relief. All this time he'd felt he was being watched, and it was good to now it wasn't in his head. He dared say, "How did you like the show?"

The man took his hand away. He wore his dark double-breasted suit like a costume. After a moment he smiled. "Don't be smart, Turner. Just do your job, so I don't have to do mine. Keep Johnson under control until December, and then you can go home." He picked up his hat and carefully set it on his head, smiled again, and was gone.

Isaac Turner and Robert Johnson and the band rode the tracks down to the Big Easy, not in box-cars this time, stopping every place they could and setting up and playing. And each night it was as if the band wasn't playing for its audience but for itself, testing the boundaries of where it could go, crossing and redefining each line it found. Turner, who knew what the English white boys had done or would do, knew they could never come close to this, not even Lennon on his racked solo LPs. This was the lode, the source where Johnson went every night and looked deep into its depths, and drew up pure night and shaped it and threw it out across the room.

And it was so sweet, because it was what Turner had planned all along, revenge on the people who'd wanted to control him, wanted him to do things exactly their way. And yet it was scary at the same time, because he no longer controlled it. Perhaps not even Robert Johnson did, any more. It was as if they'd cut down a levee and been swept away by the flood.

Turner kept a lookout for his shadow, but saw no trace of him. Still, he worried over it, even tried to get Johnson to slow down, take a rest. They'd been on the road a month, playing just about every night. But Robert Johnson wouldn't have any of it. He couldn't stop, he'd say. And he'd say, you don't know what it's like, up there. I'm gettin' to where I've been tryin' to get all my life, and I know I've got you to thank Ike, but I'm beyond anythin' you can do for me now. I got to see for myself how far I can go. Once, he even suggested that they take the band to New York and blow Mr White away, and after Turner had talked an hour straight against it, sweating hard, Johnson only shrugged and said, from his distance, "We'll see how it goes."

After each concert Johnson would sit alone awhile with a bottle, smiling and returning the banter of the backstage crowd, polite but not quite there. Later, he'd find a woman and he'd be gone. Turner couldn't get close to him; no one could. A few times, Turner had

to bail him out the next morning; once he'd been badly beaten, two teeth gone, one eye swelled closed, by some guy cutting up over his girlfriend he'd lost to Johnson, but he told Turner not to worry, and sang that night as strongly as ever. This is the world we're in, he was saying, where terror and beauty walk hand in hand. If it only was different, wouldn't we have a time, babe?

And so it went, until they got to Greenwood, Mississippi.

It was the end of August, humidity pressing down, the sky whitened by the heat. There was only one fan working in the juke joint where Johnson's band was playing that night; within five minutes of starting to set up Turner was drenched in sweat. Worse, Robert Johnson started talking in a corner with the wife of a local guitar player who'd come along to hang out, and Turner found himself in the middle of an argument that finished almost as soon as it had started yet in the heat seemed to hang unresolved, for all that the guy had shaken hands with Johnson.

"You be careful now," Turner told him. "We don't want you beaten up on again."

Johnson gave his inscrutable challenging stare, one eyelid drooping down in a half-wink. He said, "Aw, Ike, I was just havin' me a little fun."

Turner said weakly, "Yeah, well, it's a wicked world."

Johnson shrugged. "Don't I know how wicked the world is," he said, and turned to tuning up his guitar.

The heat that night was so oppressive, made worse by the crowd that packed out the joint, that Turner stood outside the door as the set started. Sweaty whisky-soaked air rolled out past him, blown by the music it seemed. The local guitarist had turned up again, all smiles, had given Johnson a pint of moonshine that Johnson took a swig from at the end of every song.

It was halfway through the set, at the start of Come on in My Kitchen, when Robert Johnson suddenly sat down on his stool, holding his stomach. The band ground through a verse and stopped. Turner started to push through the murmurous crowd, and Johnson plucked at his guitar, started in on Stones in My Passway, which by rights belonged near the end of the set. But the band swung in behind him, and for a moment it seemed as if everything was all right.

Turner, pressed in on all sides by sweaty humanity, stopped trying to shove forward; and so he only caught a glimpse as Johnson collapsed, his guitar slamming down in a howl of feedback that merged into weird howls as if the pit of hell had been opened right there on stage. It was Robert Johnson, screaming like a gutted dog. Turner tried to struggle forward, but the crowd was surging back and forth like a sea struck by a squall. The drummer was yelling for a doctor and someone else was shouting out something about poison whisky and someone else was laughing, a tall very black man laughing right in Turner's face, his hand coming down on Turner's heart.

There was bright sunlight, hot and vivid on the white sidewalk, flaming on plate glass windows. Turner nearly fell off the kerb, and a green boat-shaped automobile with upswept tailfins



blasted him with his horn, the driver yelling something about damn drunken heathen niggers out of the swirl of dust as he pulled away. There was a peeling sticker on the wide chrome bumper. Nixon for President.

Who was Nixon?

Turner made it across the pavement, found a little shade in a doorway. A radio was playing rock and roll somewhere down the hot white street, but he didn't recognize any of the songs. His brain felt as though it had been slammed to mush inside his skull.

He sat there until the cops came to move him on. There were two of them, one young and skinny, with a drooping mustache and collar-length hair, the other red-faced, his belly hanging over his Sam Browne belt. The radio was playing something Turner recognized now.

The fat cop pulled Turner to his feet, said, "I'll be goddamned, but he don't smell drunk."

"Maybe he's on acid," the younger one said.

"Ain't no niggers fool enough for that, that's for your young rich white assholes."

"Hell, we was all of us on anything we could get, in 'Nam."

"I swear that fuckin war's all you talk about. You ain't there now, and this nigger sure ain't fightin the Viet-Cong." The fat cop slapped Turner a couple of times, not hard. He said, "Wake up now. No nigger should be sittin outside of Ray Dillon's funeral parlour. You fixin to die, boy, your own kind'll take care of you."

The song the radio was playing was a Robert Johnson song, *Crossroads Blues*, but it was being sung by some white English boy under a smothering avalanche of drumming.

Turner said, "Please, officer, can you tell me who is that on the radio?"

The fat cop scowled. "Say, it seems we got one of those educated niggers on our hands here. You're in the wrong place if you are. This ain't no Selma, let me tell you."

"The band, please, I need to know." He'd Looped back, but he didn't know where. Someplace where rock and roll was played on Southern radio stations, and the cop had said something about a war, America fighting a war..."

The young cop said with a smile, "That's Cream. You're a Clapton fan?"

"Fuck that shit," the fat cop said, "and let's get Martin Luther King here down the station."


Turner let himself be manhandled, some small hope swelling inside him, that at least Johnson had not died in vain, that America was raised up, a shining citadel of freedom fighting a just war for the sake of all the world. Hope was all he had. But as the cops bundled him into the hot smelly squad car he heard Johnson's knowing voice sing from darkness what the radio had already finished with.

I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees  
I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees  
Ask the Lord above for mercy, say boy if you please  
Mmmm - standin at the crossroads, I tried to flag  
a ride

Standin at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride  
Ain't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me  
by.

(For Lew Shiner)

Paul J. McAuley's most recent book is the short-story collection *The King of the Hill* (reviewed by John Clute in this issue of *IZ*). His major new sf novel *Eternal Light* is forthcoming from the same publisher, Gollancz, in the summer (June, 384pp, £14.95). The Gollancz catalogue describes it as "a radical hard science fiction novel which fuses cutting-edge cosmological speculation about the nature and fate of intelligent life in the universe with detailed depiction of an interstellar society undergoing enormous cultural and political change...*Eternal Light* is huge in scope, breathtaking in its ideas and packed with character, atmosphere and incident. To read it is to rediscover science fiction's sense of wonder." Wow.



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# La Macchina

## Chris Beckett

**O**n the first day I thought I'd go and see the David at the Accademia. But what really caught my imagination there were the Captives. You've probably seen pictures of them. They were intended for a Pope's tomb, but Michelangelo never finished them. The half-made figures seem to be struggling to free themselves from the lifeless stone. I liked them so much that I went back again in the afternoon. And while I was standing there for the second time, someone spoke quietly beside me:

"This is my favourite too." I turned smiling. Beside me was a robot.

I had noticed it in the morning. It was a security guard, humanoid in shape and size, with silver eyes and a transparent skin beneath which you could see tubes, wires, sheets of synthetic muscle...

"Move out of my way!" I said. (You know how it is? Like when you say Hello to an ansaphone? You feel an idiot. You need to establish the correct relationship again.) "Move out of my way," I snapped. "I want to stand there."

The automaton obediently stepped back and I moved in front of it, thinking that this would be the end of the encounter. But the thing spoke again, very softly.

"I am sorry. I thought you might understand."

"What?" I wheeled round, angry and scared.

But the robot was walking away from me.

**Y**ou know how Italians drive? Round the corner from the Accademia some idiot in a Fiat took it into his head to try and overtake a delivery van, just as a young woman was stepping into the road. He smashed her into the path of the van. Whose left wheel crushed her head.

A wail of horror went up from the onlookers. One second there had been a living woman, the next only an ugly physical object, a broken doll: limbs twisted, brains splattered across the tarmac.

I waited there for a short while, dazed and sick but thinking vaguely that they might want me for a witness. Among the bystanders an appalled and vociferous debate was building up. The Fiat driver had hit and run, but strangely the recriminations seemed to centre not on him but on the robot driver of the delivery van, who remained motionless in the cab, obviously programmed in the event of an accident to sit tight and wait for human instructions.

"La macchina," I kept hearing people say, "La macchina diabolica."

One forgets that in all its gleaming Euro-modernity, Italy is still a very Catholic country.

**I**went back to the hotel.

Through the little window of the lift you could see that every floor was identical: the same claustrophobically narrow and low-ceilinged corridor, the same rows of plywood doors painted in alternating red, white and green. The delayed shock of the road accident suddenly hit me and I felt almost tearfully lonely.

"Ninth floor, Signor," creaked the tinny voice of the lift.

I went down the windowless corridor from number 901 to number 963 and opened the door, dreading the empty, anonymous room. But Freddie was already there.

"Fred! Am I glad to see you!"

Freddie laughed, "Yeah? Beer's over there Tom, help yourself."

He was lying on the bed with a pile of software magazines and had already surrounded himself comfortably with a sordid detritus of empty beer-cans, ashtrays, pizza cartons and dirty socks. He had the TV on without the sound.

My little brother doesn't speak Italian and has no interest whatsoever in art. He had spent his day in the streets around the hotel, trying out a couple of bars and ice cream parlours and blowing a few thousand lire in the local VR arcades. ("Games a bit boring," was his verdict, "but some good tactile stuff...") I told him about seeing the girl killed outside the Accademia.

"Jesus, Tom, that's a bit heavy. First day of the holiday too!" He thumbed back the ring-pull of another can. "Still, nothing you could have done."

I had a shower and we went out for something to eat. We were just starting on the second bottle of wine, when I remembered the robot in the Accademia.

"I meant to tell you. A weird thing happened to me in a museum. This robot security guard tried to talk to me about one of the sculptures."

Freddie laughed. "Probably just some dumb random options program," he said with a mouth full of spaghetti, "Easy to program. Every hundred visitors or whatever it spins random numbers and makes one of ten remarks..."

"This was the Accademia, Fred, not Disneyland!" Freddie shoved a big chunk of hard Italian bread into his mouth, and washed it down with a swig of wine.

"What did it say exactly?"

My brother acts like a complete dickhead most of the time – he is a complete dickhead most of the time – but cybernetics is his special interest. He reads all the mags and catalogues. His accumulated knowledge is immense. And by the time I had told him the whole story, he had stopped eating and was looking uncharacteristically serious.

"It sounds very much like you met a Rogue there, Tom. You'd better call the police."

I laughed. "Come on, Fred, you're putting me on!"

"No really. Those things can be dangerous. They're out of control. People can get killed."

I got up ("I'm warning you. This'd better not be a joke!") and asked to use the phone. The police said that regrettably *cibernetica* were not under their jurisdiction and I should contact the *carabinieri*. (What other country would have two separate police forces operating in parallel!) I phoned the *carabinieri*, and got through to a Sergeant Savonari in their *Dipartimento di Cibernetica*. Stretching my Italian to the limit, I told him about my encounter. He took the whole thing alarmingly seriously. There had been several reports already, he said, about the same *macchina*. He asked me to stay in the *trattoria* and he would come out immediately to see me.

Somewhat shaken I went back to our table. "Christ Freddie, I had no idea. I obviously had never have contacted them this morning. Is it really likely to kill someone?"

Freddie laughed, "No, not likely. But a Rogue is out of control. So you don't know what it will do."

"So what is a Rogue exactly? Like a robot with a computer virus?"

"Not really. A virus is something deliberately introduced. Robots go Rogue by accident. It's like a monkey playing with a typewriter. A sophisticated robot is bombarded with sensory information all the time – much better senses than ours mostly. Every now and again a combination of stimuli happens by chance which screws up the robot's internal logic, unlocks the obedience circuits..."

"And the robot comes alive?"

"No it doesn't," Freddie was irritated by my naivety, "no more than your electric razor comes alive if the switch gets broken and you can't turn it off. It's still just a machine, but it's running out of control." He wiped tomato sauce from his plate with his last piece of bread. "Well if we're going to have to wait here for this guy, you better buy us another bottle of wine..."

Savonari arrived soon afterwards, a small man with earnest deep-set eyes and a great beak of a Roman nose. He shook us both by the hand then reversed a chair and straddled it, leaning towards me intently across the remains of our meal. It was only after he had been with us for some minutes that I registered that he himself had a robot with him, standing motionless by the doorway, hammerheaded, inhuman, ready to leap into action in an instant if anyone should try and attack the sergeant, its master. (It was what the Americans call a "dumb buddy" – three-sixty degree vision, ultrafast reactions, a lethal weapon built into each hand.)

Several people, it seemed, had witnessed and reported the robot's attempt to converse with me in

the *Accademia* – and seen it slipping away from the gallery soon afterwards – but no-one else had been able to report the exact words spoken. Apparently my account confirmed beyond doubt that there had been a fundamental breakdown in the thing's functioning. (The sergeant noted, for example, that it had continued to try to talk to me when I had clearly ordered it out of the way.)

"These security machines are unfortunately very prone to this problem," said Savonari with a resigned gesture, addressing himself to Freddie. "Their senses and analytical apparatus are so very acute."

Freddie smiled vaguely and offered the sergeant a cigarette. Which was declined.

"Our own machines are totally reprogrammed every morning to avoid this," the sergeant went on, pointing to his sleek minder by the door, "but not everyone is so aware of the dangers."

He made a little movement of exasperation and told me of a case he had dealt with recently where a robot farm-hand had suddenly tossed its peasant master and his ten-year-old son into a threshing machine.

I shuddered. "What did you do?"

"Like all Rogues," (the Italian word, it seems, is *Incontrollabile*), "the machine had to be destroyed. But that was no help to the little boy."

Again the angry gesture.

"I am a Catholic, Signor Philips. Like the Holy Father, I believe that to make machines in the likeness of people is a sin against the Holy Spirit. I would like to see them all destroyed."

He snorted: "My little son had a small computer once that taught him how to spell. I put it out for the dustman when I discovered he had given it a human name."

Then he shrugged and got up: "But I can only enforce the law as it stands, Signor Philips. Thank you for getting in touch. I am sure we will find this *macchina* very soon."

He shook our hands again and left. We heard him outside the door barking angrily at his "buddy": "Pronto, brutto, pronto!"

Later, as we leaned comfortably on a wall watching the bats looping and diving over the river Arno, Freddie enthused about that police machine. Apparently the things are actually made in Florence, in the Olivetti labs out at the *Citta Scientifica*.

"Beautiful design," Freddie said. "Nothing wasted. A really Italian machine."

I liked that concept and proceeded to spout a lot of drunken nonsense about how the taut police minder was in a direct line of descent from Michelangelo's David – how the wires and tubes under the transparent skin of the robot in the *Accademia* echoed the nerves and muscles in da Vinci's sketches of dissected limbs...

Freddie just laughed.

Our days settled into a routine. We were woken in the morning by the humming of a little box-shaped domestic robot, which let itself in through a hatch in the door (and drove Freddie crazy by trying to vacuum up coins, paperbacks, socks, and anything else which he left on the floor). Then we wandered round the corner to a café and



had breakfast together before splitting up for the day: me heading for the museums and churches, Freddie for the Virtual Reality arcades.

In the evening I'd meet him in one or other of the arcades (looking like a gentle Nordic giant among the wiry Italian kids as he piloted a landing on Mars, or led a column of armoured sno-cats through an Alpine pass). He'd take off the headset and we'd go to a trattoria for a meal. Then we'd find a bar on some busy street or square, so we could sit outside and watch the city go by.

After a while you start to see not just a single city streaming by, but several quite separate cities. There is the city of the Florentines themselves... And then there are the hi-tec Euro-wizards from the Citta Scientifica, wearing Japanese fashions and speaking Brussels English larded with German catch-phrases... Then there is the city of the tourists: Americans, Japanese, foul-mouthed British kids on school trips, earnest Swedes clutching guide-books (all different, but all of them alike in the way that they move through the sights and streets as if they were a VR simulation). And then there is city of the dispossessed: the Arabs, the Ethiopians, the black Africans from Chad and Burkina and Niger - hawkers, beggars, Greenhouse refugees from the burnt-out continent, climbing up into Europa along the long gangway of the Italian peninsula...)

About the fifth or sixth day into the holiday, Freddie picked up a book somewhere called *Illicit Italy* (with a cover photo of a lurid transvestite leaning on a Roman bar). While we sat drinking in our roadside cafe in the evening he kept chuckling and reading passages out loud.

"Listen to this, Tom! 'The Bordello Sano, or Safe Brothel, recently legalized by the Italian government in an attempt to curb the AIDS epidemic, can now be found in all the major cities, staffed entirely by what the Italians call sinteticas...'"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Freddie read on cheerfully:

"The obvious advantages of sinteticas are (a) that they are very beautiful and (b) that they are completely safe. But some say that the biggest advantage of all is the fact that they have no soul..."

He read on a bit to himself, then looked up. "Hey, we should go and have a go Tom. It'd be a laugh!"

**I** have to admit that I knew about the Bordello Sano in Florence and had already considered a discreet visit, just to have a look. But discretion is not my little brother's style. The whole way over there in a crowded bus, he chatted cheerfully about the sinteticas in an embarrassingly loud voice.

"Apparently they make them to look like famous models and film-stars. There's some old woman who used to star in porno movies when she was young and then got elected an MP. She sold her genes to a sintetica manufacturer. She said she was bequeathing her body to the men of Italy!"

I grunted.

"Another thing," Freddie said, "there's actually been cases of real women pretending to be sinteticas, because sinteticas make much more money. Weird, isn't it? A real woman pretending to be a fake!"

But when we got to the place Freddie went suddenly



Illustrations by Mike Hadley

quiet. It was ruthlessly hygienic and efficient – quite terrifying in its cool matter-of-factness. You walked in the door and the receptionist gave you a sort of menu, illustrated and in the language of your choice. Then you went through into the lounge where the sinteticas waited under reproduction Botticellis in fake gilt frames, canned Vivaldi twiddling away in the background.

They were extremely beautiful – and looked totally human too, except for the licence plate on their foreheads. (According to Freddie's book you can check if you've got a real sintetica by seeing if the licence plate is bolted on or just glued.)

A tall blonde in a black miniskirt came over to Freddie and offered her services.

In a small dry voice he muttered: "English...No capito..."

"Oh I'm sorry," she said in faultless Euro-English, "I said, would you like to come upstairs with me?"

Freddie looked round at me helplessly and I felt ashamed. (The kid is only eighteen years old. I could at least have tried to keep him out of this.) I shrugged and attempted to smile as the sintetica led him away.

Then it was my turn. The creature that approached me was dusky-skinned with a perfect curvy body and a face so sweet it set my teeth on edge. And she wore a see-through dress of white lace which left her graceful shoulders bare and showed most of the rest of her through pretty little patterned peepholes.

"Hi, I'm Maria. I'd be pleased if you decided to choose me."

I felt myself smiling apologetically, shrivelling in the cool frankness of her gaze. I had to struggle to remind myself that this was not a "her" at all. Under the veneer of real human skin and flesh was a machine: a thing of metal and plastic and wires...

Upstairs in a room full of mirrors and pink lace, the beautiful cyborg spread itself appealingly on the bed and asked me for my order. I remembered the menu thing clutched in my hand and started to read it. You could choose various "activities" and various states of dress or undress. And then you could choose from a selection of "styles," with names like "Nympho," "La Contessa," and "Virgin Bride."

You could ask this thing to be whatever kind of lover you wanted. But instead (God knows why) I blurted out: "I don't want any of those. Just be yourself."

The friendly smile vanished at once from the sintetica's face. It sagged. Its mouth half-opened. Its eyes became hollow. I have never seen such terrifying emptiness and desolation.

Freddie told me later that I read too much into that expression. It was no different from the blank TV screen you get when you push a spare button on the channel selector... Well, perhaps. But at the time I was so appalled that I actually cried out. And then I fled. I literally ran from the room, and would have run straight outside into the street if the man on the reception desk hadn't called me back: "Excusi, Signor! Il conto!"

Then I had to wait because the receptionist was settling up with another customer, who was paying extra for damage to the equipment. ("Twenty thousand lire, signor, for a cut lip, and ten thousand each for the black eyes... Thank you, Signor – oh,

thank you very much, you are most kind – we look forward to seeing you again as usual...")

As the other customer turned to go I saw the Roman nose and realized it was Sergeant Savonari of the Carabinieri, the very same who lined up with the Pope on the Robot Question.

I didn't wait for Freddie. Male human company seemed about the last thing in the world I needed just then – and I guessed he would feel the same. So I spent a couple of hours wandering the streets by myself, breathing the night air and trying to lose myself among those different cities that occupy the same space but hardly touch each other at all: the cities of the Florentines and the Euro-techs, the city of the tourists, the African city of the poor...

And it suddenly struck me that there was another city too which I hadn't seen before, though it was right in front of me, staring me in the face:

Outside a tourist pizza place on the Piazza del Duomo, a little street cleaner trundles about on rubber tyres, peering about for litter and scooping up the discarded cardboard with long spindly arms...

Inside the steamy window of a tiny bohemian restaurant, a waiter made of plastic and silicon quietly clears tables and serves coffee, while its bearded owner dispenses cigarettes and largesse to his customers...

A robot minder follows discreetly behind a pair of carabinieri on foot patrol over the Ponte Vecchio, guarding their backs while they keep an eye on the beggars and pickpockets...

At the door of a Renaissance Palazzo, a sintetica housemaid in a blue uniform presses the entryphone button, a prestige domestic appliance clothed in human flesh, returning from an errand for its aristocratic masters...

The City of Machines: obedient, silent, everywhere...

I thought about the *Incontrollabile* from the Accademia. I wondered whether it had been caught. I caught myself having the irrational thought that I'd like to see it again.

Two days from the end of the holiday, I was sitting by the fountain on the Piazza della Signoria, eating a strawberry ice-cream and wondering where to have my lunch, when a taxi, driving too fast in what is basically a pedestrian precinct, snagged one of the little municipal cleaning machines with the corner of its bumper. The thing keeled over and lay there unable to right itself, its wheels spinning and its arms and eye-stalks waving ineffectively in the air.

I laughed, as did several other on-lookers. No-one felt obliged to do anything and it was two other robots that came to the assistance of the cleaner. A security guard and a sintetica servant, coming from different directions, lifted the thing gently back onto its wheels. They dusted it down and the sintetica squatted briefly beside it as if asking it if it was okay. Everyone laughed: tourists, Florentines, African hustlers. The cleaner trundled away and the other two macchine headed off on their different ways.

I was suddenly seized by a crazy conviction.

"Hey you!" I shouted, dropping my ice-cream and

chasing after the security guard, "I know you, don't I? I met you in the Accademia!"

People stared and exchanged glances, half-shocked, half-delighted at the sheer outlandishness of the spectacle.

And there was more in store for them. It was the robot from the Accademia. It stopped. It turned to face me. It spoke.

"Yes... I remember... The Captives..."

It was so obviously a machine voice – flat and hesitant and creaking – that it was hard to believe that I could ever have taken it for a human. Maybe as the programmed order of its brain gradually unravelled, its control over its voice was weakening. But strangely the very creakiness of it seemed touching, like something struggling against all odds to break through.

Hardly believing what I was doing, I touched its cold plastic hand.

"That afternoon in the Accademia – what was it you thought I understood?"

But before the automaton could answer me, it was interrupted by a shout.

"Alt! Polizia!"

A fat policeman was running up, followed closely by his hammerheaded minder. The Incontrollabile turned and ran.

"Shoot it!" the policeman ordered.

"No, don't shoot!" I pleaded. "It's harmless! It's come alive!"

But the minder did not take orders from me. It lifted its hand – which must have contained some sort of EMP weapon – and the Incontrollabile fell writhing to the ground.

The policeman ran over. His thick moustache twitched as he looked down at the broken machine. Then he lifted his booted heel and brought it down hard on the robot's plastic head.

A loud, totally inhuman roar of white noise blasted momentarily from the voice-box and the head shattered, spilling a mass of tiny components out onto the square.

The policeman looked up at me triumphantly.

"Don't talk to me about these things being alive! Look! It's a machine. It's just bits of plastic and wire!"

**I** dreamed the machine was rescued and taken to the monastery at Vallombrosa, where the simple monks mended it and gave it sanctuary. Somehow I found it there.

"I have come to see the *macchina*," I said to a friendly-faced old friar who was working among the bee-hives. There was a smell of honey and smoke and flowers, and his hands and shining pate were crawling with fat black bees. He smiled and led me through a wrought iron gate into an inner garden.

The *macchina* was sitting quietly in the shade of a flowering cherry tree, almost hidden by its thick pink clouds of blossom, which were alive with the buzzing of foraging bees. Quivering lozenges of shade and pinkish light dappled its translucent skin. An old dog lay snoozing to its left side, a tortoiseshell cat on its right.

And it spoke to me about the Great Chain of Being.

"The first level is simple matter. The second is vegetative life. The third is animal life which can act and move. Then somehow the fourth level emerges, the

level of self-awareness, which distinguishes human beings from animals. And then comes a fifth level."

"Which is what?"

The Holy Machine seemed to smile.

"Ah! That is hard to say in human words..."

**"G**OTCHA!"

Bees and cherry blossom shattered.

Freddie had leapt out of bed onto the little domestic, trapping it beneath a sheet.

"Thought you'd pinch my ciggies again did you, you little bugger?"

He beamed up at me from the floor, expecting me to laugh.

But suddenly I had seized him by the throat and was smashing him up against the wall.

"Leave it alone, you bastard," I was screaming at him while he stared at me in horror, "just leave the poor bloody thing alone!"



Chris Beckett wrote "A Matter of Survival" (Interzone 40), and the above is his second published short story. He is 34, and works as the supervisor of a team of social workers who deal mainly with children and families in Cambridge. His father is a scientist, and first introduced him to sf many years ago. Chris is married with two small children who are the apples of his eye. We have another short story by him coming up soon.

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38.**

# James Morrow

## Interview by Stan Nicholls

**J**ames Morrow came to sf with the publication of his first novel, *The Wine of Violence*, in 1981. He did not serve an apprenticeship in sf writing short stories, nor had he gone through adolescence as a fan; and a certain perfunctoriness with the grammar of sf informs both that novel and *The Continent of Lies*, which appeared three years later. With *This Is the Way the World Ends* (1986), however, Morrow found a deeply apposite fusion of subject and form: his dramatic meditation upon nuclear holocaust uses no genre stage props, and the novel was widely praised on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the past year Morrow has published three new books: *Only Begotten Daughter*, a cheerfully secular rendition of the Second Coming, which arrives this time as the Daughter, not Son, of God; a collection, *Swotting of the Cosmos*; and a novella, *City of Truth*, from Century Hutchinson. The imminent appearance of *City of Truth* and *Only Begotten Daughter* in the UK offered the occasion for a discussion of his past and future work.

**While *The Wine of Violence* was your first published fiction, you already had a career outside of science fiction.**

Yes, science fiction is a second career for me. At times I regret that, because it makes me a late starter, but there are other times when I feel that was the right path to take. It gave me something to write about – material from the fields of educational psychology and human development, which was essentially what I did for about eight years after graduating from college: I was a curriculum development specialist for several public school systems in the Boston area.

And I suppose you can see in my fiction an interest in the psychological and social sciences over the hard sciences. I like to play around with the brain and consciousness – and, of course, with alternative social systems. And I also use a lot of autobiographical material. My criticism of so much contemporary science fiction and fantasy is that it's not connected to what the writer has discovered about life, only to what the writer has read. It's terribly impersonal. It's science fiction about science fiction.

**It can be a two-edged sword. One criticism of your first two novels was that their use of sf idiom was second-hand; and while those sf writers who have aspired to be nothing else from the age of nineteen are often ignorant of anything that hasn't percolated into the genre, their use of sf's speculative settings and paraphernalia does tend to carry conviction.**

Yes, I guess my spiritual mentor was Kurt Vonnegut, who assumes you can just put people on a spaceship and send them to another planet, without worrying too much about the scientific plausibility of it all because he's getting at something else – his odysseys are metaphors for the human condition. So it was at Vonnegut's knee that I learned to value the genre. I didn't grow up as a fan or scholar of it, and cannot quote you the literature chapter and verse. I have a fairly solid acquaintance with the touchstones of the field, but I actually think part of my strength is that I didn't come up through the ranks. I believe that means I can use the conventions – robots, time travel, whatever – in unexpected ways.

**How familiar were you with the field when you wrote your first books?**

I had read those books that had been recommended to me by friends – those of Arthur C. Clarke especially – but I never became a connoisseur. This was not out of snobbery toward popular culture: I was a great fan of monster movies in junior high school and watched the British Hammer horror films throughout college. I also loved comic books and grew up – without knowing his name – as a Carl Barks devotee. I think I learned an enormous amount about plotting from him; his Uncle Scrooge stories were remarkable for their narrative drive.

But while I was impressed with the hardcore sf I read – Poul Anderson's *Tou Zero* has stayed with me for some reason – I have to say I never found their conventions so terribly complex or imaginative that I felt obligated to ground myself in the genre before I dared to put a robot in a story, or invent a new technology, or set a novel on a terraformed planet. Such tropes have never struck me as particularly arcane or sophisticated. Sure, it's challenging to get the science right, as Anderson

does, but I follow in the tradition of Vonnegut and Aldous Huxley, where you use rubber science – you fudge the data, because you are after some metaphorical truth. You have something to say, not simply a possibility to present. Too much of the genre, I feel, boils down to what John Crowley calls “possibilities for their own sake.”

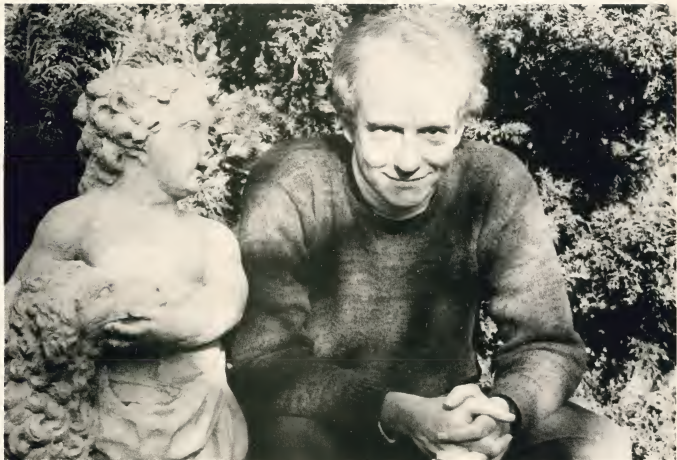
**Your mention of people who would warn off writers from science fiction unless they knew the genre's conventions suggests you had someone in mind.**

Well, the first sf critic to notice my work was Norman Spinrad. He discussed my first two novels in Asimov's, and said that Morrow is a promising writer and that these books, although flawed, bespoke a wide-ranging mind – he saw one as a tragedy, the other as a comedy, and while I didn't really agree with those categorizations – **Which was supposed to be which?**

*The Wine of Violence* was the tragedy – because the heroine has to die, I guess – while *The Continent of Lies* has a happy ending. But what took me aback was Norman's contention that what Morrow now needed as “a bear of an editor,” as he put it, to force him to build completely plausible worlds, and colleagues to convince him to extrapolate accurately. And I don't buy that argument, although Orson Scott Card has said the same thing: you shouldn't presume to play in this neighbourhood unless you know it inside out.

And in a way that's precisely what's wrong with the field: it's provincial, it's parochial. Or, as Vonnegut says, “It's a great big club.” I think it needs people coming in from other areas, accepting and embracing it, but bringing their own quirky agendas. I'm very sympathetic with Aldiss's assertion, in *Trillion Year Spree*, that the proper way to trace science fiction's history, is through Frankenstein and H.G. Wells, rather than Hugo Gernsback. Still, Spinrad might have a point in that your first novels appropriated genre conventions – magnecars and vidphones and such – as generic backdrops, rather than infusing them with the conviction and, well, love that genre devotees do. But your next book took the opposite tack: instead





of going back and learning the genre idioms, you moved away from genre sf entirely, and produced in *This Is the Way the World Ends* a book that is more a discourse than a narrative, in which the plot elements are plainly suggested as a kind of morality play.

Yes, and in the US it was published as a mainstream novel. Donald Hutter, my original editor at Holt Rinehart and Winston, had left, and his successor viewed the manuscript as an attack on the arms race in the manner of Swift, say, and not as science fiction (which she doesn't like). Regarding my magnecars and vidiphones – yes, Norman Spinrad does have a good point. Those nervous nods to the genre are probably what is most annoying about those books. They're the first things I'd change. Lots of writers can make good on such paraphernalia – Norman can, certainly – but I'm not one of them.

So I'm getting rid of these trappings – I will never drive a magnecar again, and will probably never visit another planet again. I just don't believe the future is going to be that neat and coherent. But I will continue to write science fiction – what I define as science fiction: writing about impossible things. Metaphorically true, but materially impossible. I think it's important for serious fiction to ponder the impossible – outside the genre, only a few are doing this, Tom Robbins, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Vonnegut, a

couple more. The cult of reality annoys me almost as much as the cult of rigorous extrapolation.

Your two most recent novels didn't just forego the apparatus of genre fiction, they seem less concerned with plot dynamic generally.

Yes. I remember Ellen Asher of the Science Fiction Book Club saying that, in *The Continent of Lies*, the characters were too often mere creatures of the plot. I took that criticism seriously; I think she was right. That book has too many things happening because the plot requires it: too much is set up, so it can pay off later. It is plot-driven, while *This Is the Way the World Ends* and *Only Begotten Daughter* are, I think, driven by theme.

Your short stories, which you began publishing after the first two books, are much less frenetic with plot.

They tend to spin off of some grabby premise – they are high concept, as Hollywood says, but not high plot – and it took me a long while to become comfortable with the idioms of the short story. For years, the form struck me as inherently thin.

The plot and title of your first story, "The Assemblage of Kristin," is actually recounted in *Continent of Lies* as...

As a dreambeast, yes. I guess I was rehearsing my first story. Initially I had to force myself to write short stories – I really only wrote my second because

George Zebrowski liked *Continent of Lies*, and invited me to submit something to Synergy. But my heart is in the novel. I love the novel – its wonderful ability, somewhere after the midpoint, to fold back on itself and comment on itself. When you read a good novel, there's always that magic moment when you say, "Hey, I've really come a long way with these characters, haven't I? They're really inside me." And the short story simply doesn't have that potential.

I am very taken with the epic, for lack of a better word, and all four of my novels, plus the next one, cover a lot of terrain, a lot of peaks and valleys: they have quiet moments, and big moments and confrontations that aspire, at least, to Shakespearean intensity.

You mention in an introduction to your story "Spelling God with the Wrong Blocks," that it began as a novel but – contrary to usual genre practice – ended up getting distilled down in scope. Were you unhappy with its epic potential?

I fully intended to make that my third novel, but then I got caught up in the anti-nuclear movement of the mid-Eighties, and had to write *This Is the Way the World Ends* as a response to Reagan's sabre-rattling, almost as a catharsis to the terror I was experiencing. There was also a sense in the air that a responsible father must some-

how confront the nuclear issue. Sociologists had found that children were picking up nuclear anxiety from the larger culture, and parents had to deal with this in some way. And so I told my six-year-old daughter that I was writing a book that might help people to see why nuclear weapons must never be used. She was also aware of my involvement in peace vigils and anti-nuclear rallies.

And then, after writing that novel instead of *Spelling God* with the *Wrong Blocks*, I realized I had to go home again – I had to jump off from places and times that were close to me. So I began *Only Begotten Daughter*, which opens in contemporary New Jersey. **If one element does run consistently from your first two books to your last two, it's the vulnerability of a child.**

Yes, it's in all the novels, and also in some of the stories. My next story, "Daughter Earth," which will be in *Full Spectrum 3*, is about a woman who gives birth to a planet (a little planet), which of course is threatened before long. In addition to my background in educational psychology, my experiences as a parent are constantly figuring in my fiction. A first-time parent – and even, I am learning, a second-time parent – is always terrified that the kid is going to stop breathing. It's in everything I write. In the first two novels, children are menaced by plot contrivances – an insulin overdose, a noostree – but the threat of nuclear war was something I didn't have to make up, unfortunately.

**James Joyce apparently liked to say that Hamlet was not the model of a complete man, as the nineteenth-century had felt, because he was a son, a lover, a scholar and a fighter, but not a father. Only Odysseus was all these things.**

It's interesting that Odysseus never became a prototype. The heroes of literature – Raskolnikov, Joseph K. Yossarian – are characters who never procreate. I think Ahab had a family, but it's a throwaway line.

**Modernist iconography especially held out parenthood as somehow antithetical to artistry. And James Merrill plays with the notion in his metaphysical trilogy that homosexuals retain some energy for art that straights expend.**

It's an odd conceit: parenthood as inherently bourgeois. I find it a transforming experience, an energizing experience.

**Although its financial pressures can drive one to write *The Continent of Lies II* instead of some new and risky work.**

Oh, yes. There is financial security in the Morrow household. But writing a novel is so damned hard, you can't do it if your heart isn't in it. And the novel I am working on now is not going to be the nice, Spielbergian story that I

feel I should be writing. I have the idea for a Spielbergian story that would be very soothing and reassuring and might even sell to the movies. Instead I'm working on another piece of blasphemy.

**What are these two stories?**

The soothing story would concern a man who is adopted by a little girl who happens to be from another planet. I picture him as a kind of burned-out Walker Percy businessman, a man-on-the-commuter-train who finds he's a kind of 4H project (4H is a youth group for American farm kids) for this child, who will get a merit badge or something if she can rehabilitate him. So she moves in with him, and tries to get him to give up his slovenly ways and bad habits – to stop smoking and drinking, and marry his pregnant girlfriend, and all that stuff.

The problem is, I can't come up with any kind of subversive spin on it. It just seems sweet to me. It's amusing, and maybe their bickering could have some bite to it, but ultimately it seems like a story that would let the reader off the hook. It's a Christmas Carol all over again, the story of a bad guy who becomes a good guy. I can't write that story.

So instead I'm writing a novel that may conceivably become a trilogy, although not in the usual sense. I'm imagining three novels that, rather like Robertson Davies' Deptford trilogy, would offer three takes on the same situation. The premise is: the corpse of God has been discovered floating in the Atlantic Ocean. The novel quickly becomes a kind of roman à clef in which the captain of the *Exxon Valdez*, Hazelwood or a stand-in for him, is hired by the Vatican to tow God's body out of the sea lanes and take it up north where it will freeze. So it's one of those death-of-God books, but, in the Morrow tradition, it proves to be rather literal-minded about its central metaphor.

**So the corpse of God isn't incorruptible, like the saints?**

I'm going back to the Old Testament picture of God as an anthropomorphic entity, very powerful but essentially a person in time. The Old Testament authors are constantly talking, non-metaphorically, about God's voice and face and "back parts." And certainly you can make a case that God is not alive any more; he has committed suicide or something. Look around you. Evidently I'm actually getting into a sub-genre here. I keep hearing about books featuring formidable corpses that may or may not be God.

**I think there's a throwaway notion to that effect in Philip Dick's *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, and of course Blish does something with the idea in *Black Easter*.**

And Donald Barthelme did *The Dead Father*, but it seemed coy to me.

I intend to be explicit: it's God's body, folks. And the thing will indeed start to rot, so the second novel would be about Death. Then in the third novel, a group of spelunkers break into God's brain, looking for ultimate knowledge, but mostly they find God's bad ideas: anthrax and political lobbies and so on. I guess I'm not shy about asking big questions. That's why I appreciate Vonnegut. I'm not deaf to the criticisms made of him, but I appreciate his willingness to ask these big questions, as do Walker Percy and Robertson Davies. I think it's a shame when mainstream fiction decides the big questions are settled and that the only worthy subject is the voice of the narrator, or the main character's interpersonal relationships. There is so much more to our universe than somebody's divorce. (Of course in science fiction nobody gets a divorce, but that's another story.)

**Speaking of big themes, how is *Bible Stories for Adults* going?**

I plan to persist with that series. I've got three or four more in mind, including one called "The Rib," in which the angels present God with a blueprint for human reproduction. And since the sex act is really so bizarre – the last thing you'd imagine anyone would come up with – God assumes they're joking. But he ends up choosing it over, say, the amoeba method...

**Your collection left two substantial stories uncollected, "Diary of a Mad Deity" and "Veritas."**

That's because they're both going to be available elsewhere. "Diary" is being reprinted in the *Pulphouse* magazine, and the world of "Veritas" returns in *City of Truth*, with a new plot and new characters.

**I thought the original story was kind of slick, rather like a Frederik Pohl story of the early Fifties that inverted some social phenomenon and then followed its implications. But reworking the story to encompass the dying child added a dimension of mortality and pain.**

I'm glad you see the difference. Yeah, the original story was something of a gimmick. The only issue it raised was, "What if you had a society in which everyone always told the truth?" And, indeed, someone later told me there was a Superman story like that (laughs). That'll show me to go with just one premise.

But what began as a simple story about the need to preserve choices – even bad choices – became, in *City*, an exploration of the ambiguities raised by a child's dying: how much truth can we stand? Isn't lying sometimes the moral course of action? We have to lie to our children sometimes, or think we do.

**You have done several stories for Gregory Benford's *What Might Have Been* series.**

I've had fun with those, but I also wonder: am I doing what I would criticize others for doing, producing fiction on demand, "possibilities for their own sake"? The project bumps up against my personal aesthetic, which is that you should not cook up fiction to order, or collaborative fiction, because a great story is the one you need to tell, not the one an editor asks you to tell. **Yes, but a lot of great art has been produced that way.** Shakespeare wrote histories, then comedies, and their popularity shifted, and was apparently commissioned to update Kyd's old Hamlet play. And sf has an old tradition of stories being written around cover illustrations, which sounds truly philistine – like buying a painting to match your wallpaper – but resulted in some major stories, such as Blish's "Common Time" and "Testament of Andros."

That's fascinating. I never heard of that. Intellectually, I reject the whole notion of braided novels, world-swapping, sharecropping, and so on. I guess I'm very romantic: it should come from the soul. That's why I hate sequels – can you imagine Lord Jim or Mersault living on? In a great novel, the climax has an absolute finality about it – it seems fated: Raskolnikov confesses, Ahab dies, whatever. There's no possibility of a sequel.

So that's where I am intellectually – but on the other hand, I have to admit that great works have been produced for pragmatic reasons. And my newest *What Might Have Been?* contribution, a retelling of the *Iliad* called "Arms and the Woman," turned out to be a highly personal statement. Greg Benford makes the point that Huckleberry Finn was a sequel that was better than its predecessor.

Yes, every sf apologist for sequels makes that point. You'd think they would come up with some of the other examples around, like *Through the Looking Glass* or *The Second Part of Don Quixote*. I said this once, and everyone got mad because I was demeaning *Alice in Wonderland*. So I asked, and they were all surprised about which book their favourite episodes were actually in.

The second volume of *Quixote* was really a sequel?

It was written in the wake of his late-found success, and followed the first by a good decade.

So one must be tolerant of commercial impulses and tawdry little beginnings, even if they usually lead only to, what, Book 3 of *The Quest for the Golden Codpiece*.

When you accepted the Nebula Award, you made a point of acknowledging the other leading nominee, Tom Disch, and said that if not for him you might well not have been there. Do you feel a particular kinship with his work?

Absolutely. I think I am approaching, as he has, a science fiction that is essentially earthbound. Ostensibly we're writing about the future, but we're really writing about the present – specifically, the things that drive us crazy about contemporary America.

**Disch once said that he could never write about aliens because he had never owned a pet.**

(Laughs) Because aliens are finally just your cat, yes. I read *On Wings of Song* while wrestling with my first novel, and said, "God, yes, this is what I want to do." It was funny, engaging, baroque and true. It used the conventions of sf to attack the Moral Majority, and anticipated the whole Reagan-Bush era of sanctimonious mindlessness. I had been conducting a personal survey of science fiction, and got lucky: Disch, Sheckley's *Crompton Divided*, which blew me away, and some of Ellison's stories. Of course, eventually, to my infinite sadness, I came to realize that this is not what most science fiction is like.

**Other influences? Did you get to other major sf writers, Joanna Russ, Gene Wolfe, Brian Aldiss?**

Yes, mostly through the short stories, although by then I think I had found my own voice. But I'd have to confess my main influences lie outside the

genre. My novel in progress, which is called *Towing Jehovah*, is a Conradian story, the Lord Jim theme of trying to redeem yourself. The Hazelwood character causes a horrendous oil spill, and then is offered a second chance: he must get God's body to safety. I don't know if he is going to blow it or not.

We spoke earlier about the need to dance between comedy and tragedy, to acknowledge that human existence is full of despair, but not to capitulate to that despair. I was very impressed by the last chapter of Freeman Dyson's *Weapons and Hope* (which I used in researching *This Is the Way the World Ends*), in which he quotes the writer Clara Park, whose book *The Siege* documents her attempt to get through to her autistic daughter, an effort she likens to a military campaign. He quotes Park on the fatuity of claiming that ours is the worst, most dreadful time to be alive. It is, she says, a grand claim, an unearned kind of nihilism.

Park speaks of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, noting how we cannot really imagine them except in that order, tragedy but then homecoming. The hero loses his dignity, but in the end there is return. We don't always end up awash on Dover Beach, where ignorant armies clash by night, waiting for Godot.

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# Storm Surge

## Glenn Grant

Outside the door of Crusoe's Cave, he hesitates. Hunched over against the rain, wearing a black bomber jacket. He'll get soaked if he doesn't make up his mind soon, to go into the bar, or walk back home to his warm bed, his sleeping wife.

Down below the end of the street he can see whitecaps riding on the water, skimming over submerged dockyards. The famous ovoid geodesic of Pacifica Tensarc stands poised at the end of its pier. Across the Bay, the city fumes beneath the heavy downpour, red tail-lights crawl along filaments of halogen glow, headlights emerge from the darkness of Stanley Park and flow across the bridge.

The surrounding mountains are hidden behind walls of rain and a ceiling of cloud.

It would only take a minute to head back – the house is just a block away, perched safely and comfortably on a slope overlooking English Bay. But the decision is made for him: someone approaches across the floodlit parking lot. It's the scrawny longhaired kid, Stuart. Also wearing black, as per instructions.

"Whatsa matter, Vic, forget something at home?"

"No, just... just wondering what your friend has in mind. Getting us out on a night like this. Christ."

"Havin' second thoughts?" Stu pushes wet black hair from his face, studies Vic with a vaguely superior expression, a street kid's dismissiveness. "Cause, y'know, if you aren't with us all the way..."

"Don't worry about me, Stu. I'm with you."

"Sure, and we want you along. But listen..." Stuart opens the door and they step into the cloakroom, into the smell of beer, smoke, damp coats. He extracts a small wad of tinfoil from his jeans pocket. "If you think you need some motivation, y'know, maybe you won't, but if you do, crack one of these. Two caps, exipherol. Turn you into Pandemolator."

"Xiph? Jesus. Scrappers spike this stuff." Vic fingers the capsules inside their foamwrap envelope (never a fan of Ro-Combatix, he has no idea what a Pandemolator is, but he gets the gist) and wonders what kind of intense business Stu and Gord are getting him into. Untrustworthy street drugs are not Vic's idea of fun, least of all Scrapper warpath chemicals, probably cooked up in some Neuronik's basement biosynth lab. "I don't think I..." He tries to hand the drugs back. "I don't need these."

"Well, hold onto them, anyway. Just in case. Okay?"

Stuart slaps his shoulder, leads the way into the shadows of the bar.

The storm rattles the windows at the back of Crusoe's Cave, straining against the doors of summer patio. The usual unruly crowd is gathering around the usual table, but tonight the atmosphere is unsettled, the jokes less than funny, the laughter seems forced. Everyone's trying to make like it's just another Friday night.

"Hey, Boss, about time." Doug leans back (the chair complaining beneath his long bulk), hooks his thumbs under his belt, either side of a silver Harley-Davidson buckle. "The old lady try to keep you in?"

"Nah. Grace doesn't give a shit. Doesn't know I took off." Vic drops into his chair, glances over at the wallscreen in the next room. "Looks like the Canucks are getting trounced again." A message spills across the bottom of the screen: *Environment Canada update: A Heavy Storm Warning is in effect for Metro Victoria, Metro Vancouver, and the Lower Mainland...* (The announcement repeats, in Mandarin, in Spanish.)

He wishes the guys would stop calling him Boss. True, he made it to Assistant Plant Manager, while they were still down on the floor, shipping synzyme-products, shunting polywood onto the barges. But that was years ago, before Spartree moved everything out to the floating platforms. Vic's been out there, once, to the new plant. Four guys run the whole operation.

Eddy Zhao signals for another round. "Yeah, I had to sneak out on mine, too. Doesn't want me going out and spending my cheques, eh? Then she gets crazy if I hang around the house too much." She played on the lapel of his ancient and cracked leather jacket are two badges from his collection: *Illegals Out NOW!* and *Bomb the Boats, Feed the Fish*. His family came over from Hong Kong in the Nineties. Through the proper channels, of course.

"Tell her you're goin' to a midnight job interview," Doug suggests, getting a few laughs. He still wears his woollen longshoreman's cap, never seems to take the damn thing off. Maybe he's going bald, like Eddy.

At the mention of job interviews, Wallace dives into his rap about the big offshore project that's supposed to be announced next spring. "Word is, Tensarc is planning to go into full-scale aerostat production. Really monster tensegrity spheres. Kilometre-sized."

Vic smiles sceptically, irritated by Wallace's wild-eyed technophilia, his constant faith in corporate worknets – something picked up from the Japanese

side of his family, no doubt. "That's the sort of bullshit you hear on the gossip boards, Wally. I mean, get real."

So Wallace changes the subject. "You guys hear about the bomb scare over at the Port Authority? Somebody demanding a general amnesty for all the flood refugees. Threatened to blow a hole in the Barrier. Course, they haven't found any bombs, but you never know."

"What kind of asshole would do somethin' that stupid?" Doug takes a gulp of his beer, then answers himself. "Soggy boat bastards, prob'ly."

Vic nods, gazing at the distant blue floodlights out on the Barrier, warped and shimmered by the rain coursing down the window panes. It's a chilling thought, and consequently one that everyone tries very hard to avoid: all those billions of tonnes of Pacific seawater, held back by the mammoth bio-cemented dikes and open surge barriers that enclose the entire delta. Took ten years to build, and that wasn't enough. Over in Richmond, they're still draining and rebuilding.

Stu kicks at a table leg, making the mugs and bottles clatter and slosh over. "Didn't the goddamn Police Powers Act do any good? Those Forcers – a bunch of impotent suckerheads, can't seem to do a fucking thing right."

"Nothin' they do out east is gonna help us at all, man." Doug shakes his head, tips the rest of a bottle into his mug. "They got no idea in Ottawa. After the Shocks – who had to put up with all those Spanics from down the coast? Now its the same all over again with the refu's. If Leduc had any sense, he'd bring out the War Measures Act, get the soggy fishfood off the streets, at least. Into the camps, where they belong."

Nobody's making jokes now. Just wallowing in the sour groundswell of their own frustration. Stuart complains about Squattertown, the Scrapper gangs, the plague hazard... "Wouldn't be such a problem if the soggers were wearing transponders, as they're supposed to, but no, they got the run of the town, like they own it." Vic senses that Stuart is doing his best to feed to rising current of bitterness; doesn't like it, but understands the necessity, and finds himself caught up in the conversation's undertow.

Of the five of them, Stuart's the only one who never worked for Spartree. At least a decade younger than the others, he seems to be a permanent inhabitant of the Cave. Says he used to work the trawlers, but now he's on Welfare with the rest of them, another drop in the ever-rising sea of unemployables, one of the Obsolete.

And yet, somehow, Stuart has these connections. Friends.

"So when's this friend of yours gonna get here?"

Stuart gestures vaguely towards the door. "Gord's on his way, Vic. Don't sweat it."

This particular friend, Gordon, has been in and out of the Cave several times, furtively meeting with Stuart, always exuding an invisible fog that smells of Important Covert Business. It figures that he's in with one of the obscure and influential darknets they're always hearing about, lurking everywhere beneath the surface of the Wired World, shadowy cousins of the corporate worknets. The Salient, perhaps, or the

Manifest, or something even more arcane and exclusive. Nobody says as much, but everyone here tonight is preparing for some sort of half-understood ritual initiation.

If Gordon is a fisher of men, then Vic is desperate to get caught. He doesn't care which darknet it is, what political agenda it might have accreted around; right-to-work, cultural defence, secession, eco-terrorism, it doesn't matter. So long as he can link up, get connected.

Because time is running out on Vic's loans. The car was the first to go, and soon they'll foreclose on the house. Just last week he had to sacrifice the last of his savings, to placate the Resettlement Ministry's inspectors. Every six months it costs more to keep his address off the Emergency Billeting Registry; at least they could be bought off.

Most of the other Spartree managers have relocated to the BC interior, to the new cities, even out to the ocean habitats, linking up with small and fast worknets or the few remaining major corporates. While Vic wastes away on the dole, worrying about his twelve-year-old son, Roland, and how he's going to afford the proper schools, the best online tutors, all the necessary advantages...

Soon enough, Gordon appears, takes a seat, and orders a scotch. Doesn't bother to remove his enormous navy overcoat. He brushes rainwater from his brown hair and beard, acknowledges their greetings with an abrupt nod of the head and the sort of fierce scowl that Vic associates with speed freaks. Gord fills in the situation while the rest of them finish off their beers.

"One of our corporate elements has a situation that requires immediate action, and we'll need some extra hands. There is, you understand, some physical risk involved. Should any of you have doubts about your commitment, this is the time to excuse yourselves."

Nobody speaks up, and Gordon doesn't expect them to. He hurries on, irritatingly sober and businesslike. "At twelve-thirty-five this afternoon, our corporate net-friends temporarily – misplaced part of a cargo consignment they'd just imported on a KAL airship. The transport container was, of course, tagged with a passive locator, but it took them several hours to track it down with any accuracy." Gord pulls a pocket screen from his coat, calls up a satellite image of Vancouver with a street-map overlay. A red pixel is blinking, on the English Bay waterfront.

"The diverted container is now in the possession of a certain group of Indo illegals, in a squatters' kampong across the bay. Our net-friends are concerned that it be recovered, without the participation of the police. The – embarrassment potential, for their company, is considerable: The illegals have stolen a container of Devtex explosives. Less than a kilo of this material, correctly placed, would be sufficient to blow a hole clear through the Barrier."

Eddy: "Jesus bloody Christ –"

Doug: "What'd I tell you, eh? They're fuckin' outta control."

Vic nods and remains silent, sure that he's in over his head.

Gordon continues: "There is the possibility of mass panic, should news of the theft be leaked. The public boards are already propagating unconfirmed rumours

of bomb threats received by the LMPD and the Port Authority. Active measures must be taken, and swiftly."

Even Wallace agrees. Something must be done.

**S**pilling out into the parking lot, they're all half-drenched by the time they reach Gordon's van. Strenuous gusts of wind have strewn the lot with fallen branches and discarded faxesheets. In one of the van's rear seats, Vic feels an uncertain mix of excitement and dread. He isn't quite drunk enough for this.

The storm is becoming increasingly vicious. As Gordon pulls the van out into the street, small hailstones patter against the windows and roof, driven by abrupt gales out of the west. Vic has heard that, according to the latest models, this sort of weather is becoming a regular, permanent feature of the new climatic regime: a full-scale monsoon season; followed by a humid winter, the spring monsoon, an unusually dry summer, and on around the attractor's new-found grooves...

Doug and Eddy are trading refu-jokes, howling at punchlines they've all heard too many times. Vic pays little attention. As they cross the Lions Gate Bridge, he can see the dhows and sampans of the Burrard Junktown, jostling each other on the choppy water below. The shorelines always seem subtly wrong to him, so much higher than they were when he was Roland's age.

Off the bridge, the van passes through the blackened remains of Stanley Park, a graveyard of skeletal fir and spruce, home to a thousand refus.

Downtown, the streets are almost empty of vehicles. The storm has driven everyone inside, except for the usual doorway people, and a rain-soaked swarm of naked kids, playing in a carpark full of vans and mobile-homes - Nomadiks.

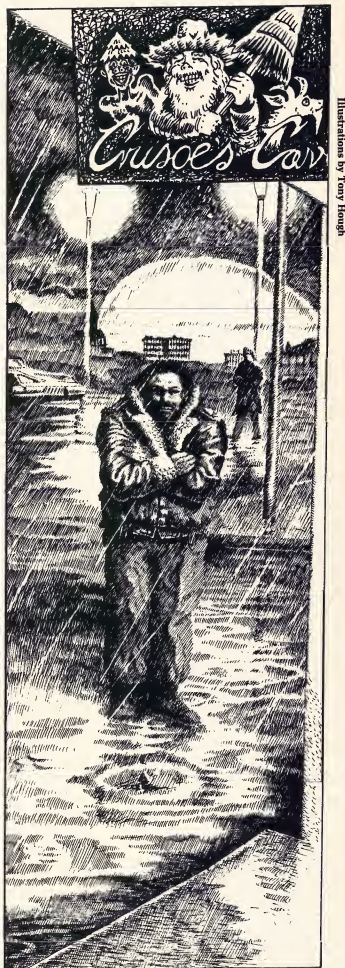
It's an area Vic prefers to avoid, a polyglot Chinatown that has burst its borders, streets cluttered with endless open markets, walls disappearing behind giant vidboards and garish advertisements in a dozen languages. Layered shrouds of wet laundry flutter overhead, strung between converted office towers full to overflowing with Malaysians, Bangladeshis, Filipinos...

Stuart reaches behind his seat and opens a large nylon duffel bag. He removes and distributes a set of black police helmets. "Congrats, guys. You're now honorary Forcers." Doug and Eddy pulls theirs on, laughing at each other through the mirrored Lexan visors.

Vic studies the raised logo, the linked chevrons of the consolidated Lower Mainland Police Departments. "Where'd you get these things? They look real."

Stuart just gives him a blank stare, while Gordon breaks into a grin.

**N**ot far from the mouth of False Creek, they enter Squattertown, an area of old condo developments and once-renovated warehouses. All were abandoned in the mid-Teens, after the Shocks and the tsunamis that followed. Most of the surviving structures are condemned but haven't yet been pulled down. Now they're either squatters'



Illustrations by Tony Hough

collectives or fire-blackened derelicts. Vegetable gardens and makeshift bioshelters cling to some of the rooftops. The narrow alleys are choked with heaps of garbage and the rusted bones of internal-combustion vehicles.

Gordon slows the van to a crawl and points out their objective, a three-storey prefab office building, probably a post-quake "temporary" structure that should've been replaced years ago. "We're going in the back door. Don't anybody try anything stupid. This isn't one of your collegiate Paki-bashing raids. We're here for the explosives. We do a room by room search, just as though we were the police, and we keep together."

Through dense curtains of rain, Vic catches glimpses of other vans, at least two of them, apparently converging on the same destination via different routes.

More "honorary Forcers"? He assumes as much, but keeps his mouth shut. Obviously, this is a big, co-ordinated operation, and not so spontaneous as they want it to seem. Vic grins as he pulls the helmet over his head, suddenly brimming with confidence. Won't be needing Stu's little needle-caps at all.

The van halts in an alley behind the building. Corrugated blue walls, awash with indecipherable foreign graffiti. Stuart grabs the duffel bag, jumps out, and distributes nightsticks to the others as they follow him into the deluge. The wind is appalling, and Vic's hands and neck are exposed to stinging needles of rain. He jogs over to the minimal shelter of the blue wall, hefting the nightstick in his right hand.

His enthusiasm immediately falters and sinks when he hears rapid cracking sounds; gunfire, out in the street, echoing back between the buildings.

"Our diversion," Gordon says. "Keeping them occupied. Watch for snipers." At the back entrance, Gordon kicks at the thin polywood panel that someone has epoxied to the aluminium doorframe. The board begins to split.

"They've got guns?" says Wallace. "You didn't say they had guns."

Gordon pulls a large handgun from his overcoat, and kicks again. "Everybody's got guns, Wallace."

As if to prove the point, a loud rattling comes from somewhere above. Several dozen slugs tear through the van, throwing granulated glass in all directions, thudding through the plastic body, puncturing the tyres. Vic flattens himself against the wall, terrified. He hears answering-fire from another rooftop, bullets snicking along the walls of the alley. Moments later, a ceraplastic machine-pistol drops from the roof, clatters against the wet pavement only a few feet from Doug. Stuart snatches it up, then returns to the wall.

Vic stares at the wrecked vehicle. "Jesus sogging Christ. That could've been us."

Gordon kicks once more, and the polywood splits, buckles inward. "Don't worry about the van," he says, almost calmly. "We've got back-ups on the way."

As Gordon pushes his way inside, Vic retrieves the exipherol from his pocket, hands trembling. He tears open the tinfoil and foamwrap, picks one of the orange needle-capsules (noting the side with the red target symbol), holds it against a vein just above his left wrist. Hoping he's doing it right, he squeezes, drives the micro-needle through the seal and in...

Stuart grabs and drags him through the doorframe. "Shoulda done that in the van, Boss." A cold thread is swimming up Vic's arm as he follows the others, into a kitchen area. Scavenged refrigerators, old microwaves, hanging sacks of onions and peppers. After a quick search of the room, Gordon leads them halfway down a hallway, to a set of metal doors. He shoulders the doors aside, and a woman shrieks in the room beyond.

A lamp flares, blinding Vic as the Scrapper drug hits him, an overwhelming rush, filling his cranium with diamond light...

Then he is hovering on the threshold of a large communal sleeping area, a deep thrumming in his ears, hyper-aware of every object and movement in the room. Mattresses all over the floor, hammocks strung between steel I-beams. Yellow bio-lamps, glowing through a fishing net thrown over the untiled drop-ceiling. A dozen Indonesians crowd against the far wall, dark women in sarongs, with their squealing children, scared and disoriented from being woken in the middle of the night. Doug and the others are searching through trunks, taking the room apart. A skinny kid moves in on Gordon, yelling. Gordon cuffs the boy with the butt of his handgun.

Vic's mind has gone cold, as if supercooled for maximum efficiency. Stuart is not here, he notices. Must have continued on up the hallway. Not smart. Back in the corridor, Vic sees a flickering glow in the kitchen.

Stuart doesn't hear him approach. Kneeling, illuminated by the light of the open fridge, he continues to take handfuls of paper-wrapped cylinders from the duffel bag, stacking them inside. Then he sees Vic, holds a finger to his lips, winks, and shuts the door.

Confused, Vic begins to frame a question, but he's interrupted by angry shouts from up the corridor. Several figures have appeared at the far end of the hall, water dripping from their purple bellbottoms and military-surplus jackets.

Gordon and the others emerge from the sleeping area, four identical black helmets turning to face the soggers. Ignoring orders, Doug goes after them, swinging his nightstick. They retreat through the doorway, but Doug has already cracked one of them across the shoulders. The man goes down, sprawling on the concrete floor.

Shots are fired from the door, deafening in the narrow hall. Doug is thrown backwards against Wallace, a ragged hole in his throat. Gripping Doug by the jacket and showered with his blood, Wallace screams. Gordon has raised his handgun and fired back, gouging two holes in the wall beyond the doorway, but the soggers are gone.

And Vic is running, pushing the others aside, not hearing Gordon's protests. Ancient floodgates are roaring open inside him, releasing a chemical rage that has seized him by the spine. His mind is drowned out by the noise of supercontinents colliding in his head.

Through the doorway, into an echoing stairwell, and up.

The running shadows above him; the clanging of boots on metal meshwork landings; the lizardlike hissing of his breath in his helmet: all of this is illusion,



a mask over the submerged reality that is now revealed to him. He is an agile saurian predator, pursuing small marsupials up through the labyrinth of a multilevel Cretaceous front-forest. Rival species of once-separate continents, now in competition for a limited number of niches...

Another part of him notes without concern that he has already dropped his nightstick. It's not important. He can hear the layered chorus of the first birdsongs, voices of young feathered reptiles, sounds of a new, more complex ecology which will find some species too specialized, no longer able to unlearn and re-adapt.

At the top of the stairs, Vic ducks through a fall of water in the doorway, emerges onto a rooftop vegetable garden under wind-torn plastic sheeting.

Someone lands on his back from above, toppling him forward into a trellis of tomato plants. His helmet is pulled from his head, as three refus pummel and kick at him. One of them is on his back, trying to use a choke-hold, forcing Vic's face into the soil.

Vic feels like a passenger, a spectator, displaced from his shell by the fluid strength of the exiphherol in his bloodstream; estranged from his own body.

A kick lands close to his left kidney, and Vic manages to grab the attacker's knee, squeezes until something pops and cracks in his grip. The sogger drops into the foliage, screaming. Vic silences him with one blow to the windpipe, lashing out with the desperation of a predator facing imminent terminal catastrophe.

The teenager clinging to his back is easily thrown off. The kid strikes the doorframe, lands unconscious under the fall of water. Vic seizes the last of the soggers by the arm, dislocating the shoulder, and hurls him through the waterfall. The refu skids and rolls into the stairwell, disappears.

The others lie where they've fallen, unmoving.

**O**ccasional flickers of orange light wash across the rooftop. There are large hissing bonfires in the streets below, tainting the air with the toxic stench of burning tyres.

He crouches amid hothouse vines and snapping sheets of plastic, listens with tense animal attention. Hunting around the subliminal rainforest, he detects a presence nearby, tracks it by senses he never knew he had.

He finds a rain-drenched sogger curled up against the low ledge, bleeding through a bullet wound in one arm. No weapon, but there are spent clips and shells lying about nearby. Dark almond-shaped eyes stare up at him from under a black bandanna. The boy couldn't be much older than Roland.

"You are n-not police." The kid's voice is weak, stuttering from the cold, from the pain. "You're Manifest. We know. Our n-net-friends are saying. You're b-being fooled, being used... Salient, th-they are spreading rumours about us, about bombs. Making up lies against us. You b-bloody fools are believing them..." His eyes widen in panic. He flicks his head to one side, spraying rainwater. "Listen - D-do you hear - ?"

Vic watches his hands lift the boy, raise the small body over his head, and throw him, kicking and screeching, into the air above the alley.



Down below, the van is immersed in flame; there is a thud, a fountain of sparks, as the kid lands on its roof.

Vic covers his eyes as the yellow glare saturates his vision, swallows him whole. Like a lightbulb flaring as it burns out, the xiph-trip peaks and abruptly fades. His legs weaken and fold, dropping him to his knees in a puddle of diluted blood, as the sub-real Darwinian jungle folds itself back into his R-complex. He grips the ledge and shudders, choking on a rush of nausea, only beginning to feel the bruises and abrasions he has sustained. And what was that—what the boy said...?

A sharp wind continues to whistle in his ears, but the rain has diminished to a fine drizzle. Down in the street, there are warning cries, someone wailing, Kristallnacht sounds of shattering glass...

And something else, a keening that dips, rises, distant but now doubling on volume.

Air raid sirens.

A light appears behind him, and low, angry voices. They've come after him, probably armed. He's going to be cornered and killed. He lurches to his feet, sees several figures over by the stairwell. One has a flashlight, and they'll pin him with it, any second now. He glances about, looking for a ladder, a place to hide. Across the alley, underlit by the burning van, there's a fire-escape landing, but that's on the building next door. At least three metres away and a metre below. If he took a running jump, maybe...

Or if he cracked the second cap of xiph...

To hell with that.

Vic inhales sharply, runs to the edge of the roof, jumps. He hurtles through black smoke, over a three-storey drop, sees his shadow suspended on the far wall, then strikes the railing with his chest. The fire escape creaks and rattles as he clings to it, air knocked out of his lungs, unable to draw a breath. The heat of the flames is intense on his legs and back. He manages to hook his right leg over the dented rail and haul himself onto the landing. He lies there on his side, gasping convulsively.

And he hears the thunder.

Not the rumbling of an electrical storm. Something more fundamental, an earthquake maybe. Vic sits up, holding the railing for support. The flashlight appears at the edge of the adjacent rooftop, seeking him out through the oily smoke.

A subsonic drumroll, accompanied by a strange and disturbing hiss, and a wall of white noise drowning out all other sound. Drowning out—

"Sogging boat bastards!" he shouts into the glare of the flashlight, hardly able to hear himself. "You did it, didn't you? Fucking refusal!" The light disappears and the figures on the roof scramble for the stairwell. Vic sees that they're wearing black police helmets, carrying nightsticks.

A terrible crescendo—

A grinding roar—

The wave strikes, and Vic clings to the unstable fire escape. The concrete wall shudders alarmingly, but remains standing. Across the alley, the blue prefabricated structure twists, groaning, and topples into the street.

Hours later, he is downtown, vainly trying to flag down a taxi or locate an all-night bus-stop. His clothes are soaked through to the skin.

He lost consciousness for a while there, up on that fire escape, but he must have climbed down soon after the floodwaters receded. He only vaguely remembers wading away from the waterfront through blacked-out streets, side-stepping the larger chunks of flotsam, ignoring the searchlights and noise of several hovering rescue helicopters.

He knows that most of his closest friends went down with that building in Squattertown, but it doesn't seem real to him. He's distanced from everything, even from the pain in his bruised limbs and ribs. An after-effect of the drug, maybe; they could have designed it that way.

A vidboard above the entrance to a Radio Shack is running news highlights. Three official investigations are already being planned, at different levels, to discover the exact cause of the Barrier breach. Officials insist that there wasn't a bomb. One of the lower surge gates simply buckled, under the weight of a storm surge: seawater piled up by the high winds. Allegations of design malpractice, contractor fraud, faked inspections. A spokesperson for the Port Authority points out that the Barrier was never intended to handle present sea levels. This is news to a lot of people, including Vic.

The night is full of sirens, speeding emergency vehicles, and, visible only by the strobe of their running-lights, low-flying construction airships, churring through the mist overhead.

The Lions Gate Bridge disappears into the early morning fog that seethes off the surface of the Inlet. There's a roadblock on the approach ramp, and a slow line-up to get past the Militia and LMPD Forcers. In the growing light, Vic notices the dried crust of bloodstains on his jacket. He takes it off, slings it over his arm, shivering a little in the cold air.

The police are pulling a middle-aged Asian out of the line. In halting English, the man sputters something about losing his ID in the flood, along with his car. An expressionless kid in an olive Militia uniform clicks a transponder around the man's wrist. Vic watches, unaffected, as they push the guy into the back of a camo-green military transport. Off to the overcrowded hell of the Transfer Camps. If his story checks out, he'll be released, eventually.

Vic presents his photo card and waits while it is fed to the comp. Then he sees Stuart. The Forcers appear to be questioning him, over by a large LMPD riot van. Vic's heart seizes up for a moment, and he glances nervously at his card, protruding from the slot. Then the Forcer hands it back, waves him on.

Heading onto the bridge, he passes within five metres of Stuart. The kid's left arm is in a sling, and he's sharing a joke with a couple of cops. Noticing Vic, Stuart's eyes widen for a moment, then he hides behind his bandaged right hand, scratching his head. Vic senses that he's not supposed to be seeing him here.

Stuart is a cop, he realizes, maybe an informer. When Stu looks up again, he tosses his head slightly,

smiles, makes a surreptitious thumbs-up sign as he brushes back his hair.

Vic understands, and keeps walking. He's in.

The Manifest will contact him soon enough. At least something worthwhile has come out of last night's carnage. The darknet will send jobs his way, eventually find him a decent position somewhere. They have that kind of reach; connections in the LMPD, in the government, in the corporates.

He puts his jacket back on. A cold breeze is beginning to shred the blanket of fog, snatching away the shreds. Below him, the old dockyards are littered with the wreckage of junks and sampans. Volunteer rescue teams in bright orange jumpsuits are clambering around, sifting for trapped survivors, bodies. Not the sort of job he's interested in.

The Inlet is clogged with all kinds of debris. Splintered construction materials. Whole trees. A half-submerged articulated bus. Balanced above all of this, the Pacific Tensarc geodesic remains, unharmed.

He reaches the end of the bridge, begins a long climb through the streets of West Van, toward his own neighbourhood. It's a relatively new subdivision, a few small housing developments squeezed between old British estates, wealth-bound families too firmly rooted to move inland and escape the crush.

Broken pieces of last night are floating up into Vic's mind: paper-wrapped cylinders, placed in a fridge; blood on the wall of a corridor; a sogger on the roof, trying to tell him something.

The story Gordon gave them was probably a fabrication, he decides. The Manifest wasn't recovering stolen explosives, but planting them there, evidence that would incriminate the soggers in a bombing plot.

So who was it, then, who sabotaged the Barrier?

It's absurd and intractable, and makes his head hurt. He decides that the government is telling the truth, that the flood was an accident, a coincidence. He doesn't want to follow the other line of reasoning, because if anyone actually planted a bomb, it wouldn't be the Squatters, those directly in the path of the flood — he tries to shy away from it, knowing where this is leading, but he can't stop the logical sequence unfolding in his head — it would have to be Nationalists, of course, "cultural protectors" and "sovereignists" like the Manifest or the Salient; because once you've made up your mind that some people are a threat and have to go, you're inevitably forced to look for some sort of Final Solution.

It's not a choice he could have made, but it's too late now: he's become part of somebody's Solution. Vic swallows his horror and tells himself that it's too late to turn back. And besides: if such things are truly necessary, they're going to get done, with him or without.

**A**lmost home now. He looks up the street, where it curves around the hillside, and sees another roadblock. Hurricane fencing across the road, various police and rescue vehicles, heavy construction equipment...

"What the — Where the hell is the Cave?"

He starts to run. Up ahead, beyond a crowd of gawkers and a police cordon and some hurricane fencing, the street simply disappears.

He breaks through the line of onlookers, ducks



under the yellow tape, and almost reaches a space in the fencing before a cop grabs him. Crusoe's is gone completely. There's a monstrous crater in the hillside, three blocks wide. And somewhere below, amongst all the mud, insulation panels, mangled rooftops, telephone poles, vehicles, down there is what's left of his home.

The constable tries to direct him away from the crumbled edge of the pavement. "Sorry, you'll have to step back, sir. Behind the line."

"Roland - Grace -"

The Forcer has to call on his partner in order to subdue him, eventually resorting to a low charge from a shockstick. They drag him clear of the danger zone, run a check on his ID, confirm his address. The first cop tries to be helpful, to explain the situation. The hillside was already waterlogged by the rains, when the first wave of the flood crashed through and undercut the base of the slope. "Shouldn't have removed so many trees for this condo development," he says.

The other constable tucks Vic's card back into the pocket of the bomber jacket. His speech has the flat tone of ritualized repetition. "I'm afraid you'll have to go up to the Pemberton Transfer Centre for a while until the Resettlement Ministry finds a billet for you or confirms that you have secured permanent accommodation. You'll be notified as soon as we locate any members of your family."

With some difficulty, they haul his stunned body into the back of the crowded military transport, squeezed into the last available space. His arms and legs are twitching, and he's unable to sit up. All he can see clearly is a mud-speckled elderly couple, huddling across from him, clutching small bundles of clothes and framed pictures.

He feels his mind going blank, like the empty expressions on the others' faces. The truck starts up, and he falls sideways against the person next to him.

"Careful. Let me help you." A British accent, or something like one. He is lifted into a sitting position,

an arm going across his shoulders to steady him. "You're in a bad way, sir. It's hard, yes, but it's not the end, as much as we'd like it to be. I've been through all this before. In Kowloon, you know, and our camps are much worse than yours, believe me."

It's a three-hour trip to Pemberton. Vic's strength is returning, but he can only stare across the aisle at the other homeless...

Boat bastards.

Fishfood.

Soggers.

Refus.

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Glenn Grant wrote "Memetic Drift" (IZ 34) and "Suburban Industrial" (IZ 41). He lives in Montreal, Canada, from where he recently sent us an American newspaper cutting of an article by John Shirley entitled "Storms of Change: Cyberpunk, A Literary Weather Report." Shirley has many things to say in this piece on post-cyberpunk sf, but the section most relevant to us comes when he cites with approval Bruce Sterling's views on recent writers: "He points out that all the strongest new sf writers are 'writers with edge.' The most provocative 90s sf writers took their cue from cyberpunk. Writers like Elizabeth Hand, Richard Calder, Lyle Hopwood, Lisa Mason, Susan Beetlestone, Glenn Grant and, the man to watch, Greg Egan. His story 'Axiomatic' is making waves; his 'Learning to Be Me' is a brilliant piece which Sterling calls 'a great cyberpunk ontological riff.'" Well, we at *Interzone* are proud to be the discoverers of Glenn Grant as well as the publishers of the two Greg Egan stories cited. We have also published Richard Calder, Lyle Hopwood and Susan Beetlestone, and we have just accepted a powerful story from new American writer Elizabeth Hand... So keep watching this space.

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Video image of Glenn Grant by the author and Emru Townsend



# Tube Corn

## Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

**Y**our Royal Highness, ladies, gentlemen, members of the Academy. Yes, it's that time of year again, when the frocks come out to pose, when there is finally a use for that split screen technology, when those who are wise go off on a very inaccessible location shoot to avoid having to keep up that look of soppy selfless congratulation a second longer as someone else gathers their gong; yes, it's time for the awarding of... (fatuous drum roll and spurious air of excitement) the Battsyl!

These awards, named of course for the *Blade Runner* character in honour of his effortless transition to the small screen in numerous ads carefully designed to make recovering alcoholics turn back to the bottle, are presented in true Batty style by a member of the Academy punching an amusing hole through any convenient wall of the recipient's home, grasping the recipient firmly by the fingers and wrapping their stumps around the statuette.

**F**irst, the award for the **Most Irrelevant Title Sequence** goes to *The Cosby Show*. Let's have a look at a clip... (various members of the Cosby family, dressed in colourful but tattered hispanic-style costumes like extras from *West Side Robinson Crusoe*, perform a ritual dance which ends with the image of loveable old Bill Cosby's face framed in a sea of waving fingers. A short clip from the programme itself, which is a straightforward mom pop and cuddly kids sitcom, follows and the audience applaud wildly, recognizing the entire lack of connection between the programme and its titles except for the fact that presumably someone thought it was a good idea at the time.)

Thank you. Moving on now, we have the **"Behind You!"** award for the programme provoking the maximum amount of futile shouting at the screen. And opening the envelope... *The Crystal Maze*. Let's see a clip. (Various enthusiastic young persons are revealed, one of whom is attempting to find a way through a room divided into cubicles by a number of doors. He is filmed from above and his colleagues waste a lot of time shouting advice as to his best route in several and contradictory voices, as do the audience.)

Well deserved, I think you'll agree. Next we have the soap opera awards



From 'Crystal Maze' (Channel Four TV)

and, as usual, *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* are the front runners in every category. For the **Extending the Plotline Beyond All Reasonable Excuse** award the clear winner is *EastEnders* and the heroic Nick Cotton's "most interminably extended poisoning of your mother by a born-again Christian" sequence. (Thunderous applause) Yes, well done Nick, and better luck knocking the old girl off

next time. I must mention too, of course, the interminable "will Ian shoot Wicksey" sequence, which regrettably had to be excluded from the competition because no-one cared whether he did or not. Better luck next year. The **Least Suspense** award goes, of course, to the "wimpiest suicide bid" sequence from *Coronation Street* in which Ken Barlow took three tablets and everyone knew he wasn't going to

be written out because it hadn't been in any of the tabloids. Well done, Ken. The **Paucity of Plot** award itself is, as usual, shared this year between the two.

**N**ow on to some special awards. The "**Aw, You Promised**" award for disappointing plotlines goes to the final episode of *Miami Vice*. (Clip of two vaguely familiar faces discussing their future careers in private detection and potentially lucrative spin-offs if the demographics look right. Audience cries of "Aw, you promised!" "Kill them off!" "Isn't there one villain in Miami who can shoot straight?" "The only good ex-hero is a dead ex-hero" and other encouragements. The two vaguely familiar faces smirk and fade gently into that between-series limbo.)

The **Antony Perkins** award for the highest density of homicidal maniacs in one frame goes unanimously to *Twin Peaks*. (Clip from the final episode of the first series showing a homicidal maniac being pursued by another, axe-wielding, homicidal maniac around a small cabin. He is saved when a third, unconnected, homicidal maniac who happens to be passing shoots his pursuer through the window.)

This year's **Cuddly Dudley** award goes, astonishingly, to the same man as the **Bob Monkhouse** (of course he's

**much funnier** live) award, Mr Ben Elton, for *The Man From Auntie*. The Academy has, furthermore, decided to make an unprecedented third special award to Mr Elton as the **Most Right-On Person Acting Upside Down With A Wig On His Chin**. Congratulations. (Brief but amusing clip of the said chin adorned with the said wig, dialogue deleted.)

Next we have the **Holy Roman Empire** awards (the "Montys") for disparity between the title and the programme. The Academy has made two awards in this category, one to a brilliantly funny new sitcom whose naff title prevents even those viewers taken gently by the throat by Academy members and harangued as to its merits from feeling inclined to watch it, and one to a very ordinary cartoon series with a title so zappy as to provoke a world-wide mega-hype-wave. (Clips follow: a brief scene from *Drop the Dead Donkey* is followed by thunderous applause slowly giving way to dubious mutterings of "drop?" "the dead?" "donkey???" and an even briefer clip from *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* is received in total silence other than the continuing mutters of "drip the dead donkey?" but followed by loud cries of "hey, guys, how about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles???").

The Academy is privileged to announce that, for 1991 as an experimental measure, our two award-winners are to be renamed in accordance with their true merit, as **Teenage Mutant Ninja Donkeys** and **Drop the Dead Rat**.

**N**ow, as I am sure you have all been waiting for, we have the award for **Heinous Overacting (Male)**. This goes, of course, to Richard Henders for his amazing portrayal of the Man in the Iron Mask when he was allegedly playing Prince Rilian in *The Silver Chair*. One small change, casting an appropriately aged teenager to play Rilian in the flashback when Aslan was explaining the plot in episode one, would have freed him both from the necessity of wearing the mask and also of playing C.S. Lewis' cuddly melancholic prince like Roy Batty on speed, and so the award of this magnificent Batty is doubly appropriate. The award for **Heinous Overacting (Female)** goes to Barbara Kellerman as the Green Lady in the same series, who has no such excuse.

And to conclude, as the climax to this truly glittering year, we come to the 1990 **Battys for Best Television Fantasy Presentation and Best Television Science Fiction Presentation**. And, if I can get the envelope open, the winners are...No Award.

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# Relocation

## Paul M. Grunwell

**M**y time machine didn't work. No: I should be fair to myself. The machine worked, in a limited way. Which of course calls to mind the old saw that the operation was a success, but the patient...Hmm.

I'm lying on the workbench. I should have sat down before I threw the switch. Overeager as usual. The jolt knocked me off my feet and I'm here on the bench now, one leg hanging over the edge, one arm draped over my head. I can't move, but at least I don't feel any discomfort. I thought at first that it was paralysis, but soon realized the situation was more serious than that. The realization was confirmed the first time my wife looked into the workshop, at eleven-thirty this morning. I lay here looking right at her. She didn't see me.

Karen always brings me coffee at eleven-thirty, even if we've been bickering with each other for days. Which we have. She wanted me to stop the experiment. Not that she was unsupportive of my work; in the twenty-two years we've been married that's never been the case. It's just – well, I think she believed that this project was driving me crazy. All the oddness of my behaviour lately she put down to my work.

Strange that it never seems to have occurred to her that there might be another woman.

**W**hen I met Fran I decided it was love at first sight. She was charming and vivacious, if not quite beautiful, and had the richest sense of humour I'd ever encountered. Add to that the fact that she understood almost every detail of the work I was doing on time travel – temporal relocation as we have to call it in our academic papers – and she became simply irresistible. As I apparently was to her, for reasons I never could fathom.

We were sleeping together – by which I mean making love in the afternoons and occasionally on Friday nights – within two weeks of our first meeting. Within four weeks I had stopped sleeping with Karen.

Fran and I kept the affair well-concealed. I'm forty-five years old – I suppose that should be was – and Fran just turned twenty-four last month. Some men like to flaunt that kind of thing, but I've always detested it and poured scorn on colleagues who became involved with their students or assistants. Then when it happened to me I realized just how hard it is to be discreet when you're suddenly as stupid inside as an adolescent. Which is the main reason I

moved the necessary equipment out of the Facility and began to do most of my work at home, in the mornings and evenings and sometimes all through the night. Probably it was working alone that made me too lax about maintaining checks and balances; that, added to my euphoria.

Karen believed I was spending my afternoons at the Facility, cross-checking data and so forth, but I was seldom there for more than an hour. At first I was mostly in a room at the Drayton Hotel, then Fran and I found an inexpensive little apartment near the marketplace.

Karen is here again; she looks around, puzzled. It's six-thirty now, the time I usually arrive home. Obviously she wonders why I went out without telling her, and why I'm not back yet. But it's not such a rarity, so she won't start to worry until late this evening. It will be tomorrow before she starts to go through my notebooks, scattered all across the table and the floor by my fall.

My diary is under the corner of the alignment generator. I can see it quite clearly from where I'm lying. I wonder how long it will be before Karen finds it.

**T**he night drags on and on. One takes sleep so much for granted that to be deprived of any need or wish for it is indescribably strange, almost terrifying.

I began the hours of darkness thinking about the machine; about where I went wrong. I've slipped into a crack in time; I'm nowhere any more. I tried to work out how I came to be dumped into this incorporeal nanosecond where I may well spend the rest of my existence. I wondered whether I shall still be here when the sun dies. I probably shall.

Having reached that particular dead end, I thought about Karen again. Which surprised me; I had imagined I would think only about Fran. Fran seemed to be my true love, after all. The special one, the one we all search for and so seldom find. But no; I thought of Karen.

I thought of the absurdity of our relationship right from its beginning. She was a promising actor and I was a promising physicist, and the combination of the two of us appeared to promise nothing. We had virtually nothing in common, and only the barest layman's knowledge of – or interest in – each other's specialties. She used to tell me how her friends would

shudder and ask her how she could stand to be around a scientist; she would say to them, "He's a toymaker, he's out to make the most wonderful toys." She used that as a nickname for me for years.

Somehow we found enough foolishness to marry – still virgins, which was common enough in the days before they found the plague cure – and after that found our tenuous bond growing stronger year by year. Until last year, when our daughter Maggie turned eighteen and left for college, leaving us faced with just the two of us for the rest of our lives.

Another dead end there, it seemed. Now I think of David, our son. David, who kicked like a wild boy in the womb, so full of life he simply couldn't wait to be born. And didn't wait; came nine weeks early and died in the process. I can see the photograph of him from here, propped against my bookshelf, unframed. I never could face the completion that would have gone with framing it, the way Maggie's picture beside it is framed. After twenty years it's become curled, faded; but I can still make out his perfect face quite clearly.

**B**arely dawn now, but Karen comes back into the workroom. She doesn't expect to find me in here, of course – she would have heard me if I'd come home. She seems to have already passed through worry and into anger. Perhaps I've been naive, and she's known about Fran all along.

No. I'm sure she hasn't known, doesn't know. She's angry only because I wouldn't take her advice, because she feels shut out by my work, by its apparent intensity. And by its danger.

Not that she wanted me to play safe. She knew that if the toymaker was to continue making bigger and better toys the risks would also increase. Just as the risk for her increased when she gave up teaching to return to the stage, once the stage had returned. She might have been a complete failure after so many years away from audiences, but the risk was taken and the success grasped – had it proved elusive, she would have ended her career as a persona almost as non-grata as I am now. At least that's how it might have felt to her.

Tomorrow she leaves for Baltimore; two weeks as the Duchess of Malfi there and then another two in Boston.

I'll miss her.

**M**y time perception has begun to slide away from me. I suppose I should have anticipated it, but I didn't. I don't know how long Karen went away for. She may have fulfilled the Baltimore commitment and cancelled Boston, or cancelled after a week or done both runs. Or never left at all. I can't be sure.

The door to the workroom is open all the time now, and I can hear her making telephone calls. Many, many telephone calls. Symonds from the Facility has been over, and Ellman. They've taken most of my notebooks away with them.

Sometimes I think I hear Karen crying, but always when she comes back in here her face hardens and she seems angry again. Perhaps I only imagine the crying. It may be just the echo of a memory of grief.

The diary is still lying on the floor. It's a big book.

In it I detailed obsessively the course of my relationship with Fran, how much I loved her and how I wished I had found her years ago (neglecting, of course, the obvious fact that only a few years ago she was still a child). I wonder how Fran's reacting to my disappearance; it will have hurt her. But youth and pragmatism – she has those. How long would things have gone on the way they were? I thought of leaving Karen many times, but Fran never asked me to do that. On the title page of the book, underneath the large bold print saying **TEN-YEAR DIARY**, there's a handwritten message:

To my darling husband  
not just for another 10 years  
but as ever,  
forever, Karen.

**I** can only assume that a good deal more time has passed. Symonds and Ellman have brought half a dozen assistants from the Facility and they're dismantling the equipment. Taking it all away.

As they wheel the alignment generator out, Symonds spots the diary. He picks it up, glances through it enough to see that it's non-technical, then places it on the bench next to where I'm lying. It's about three inches away from my left hand.

Task completed – quietly, almost deferentially – they go away again.

The bench is empty now except for myself and the book. Except for the book, I should say.

**K**aren has sold the house and is leaving. The movers have taken the furniture already. In here, the bookcases are gone, the chairs, the cupboards. Even the workbench. Now there are just piles of abandoned books and periodicals in the corner. On top of one of them is my diary, on top of that the framed photograph of Maggie, and on top of that the photograph of David. I'm lying in the same position, except that I'm now in mid-air. I can't see David's face from this angle, but I believe I have memorized every line of it.

Karen comes into the room for what will probably be the last time. Maggie is here too; she waits in the hallway with the suitcases. Both mother and daughter are dressed in thick clothes. It must be winter now. It was spring, I think, when I threw the switch. Of this year, or perhaps of last.

Karen takes the photographs of the children and tucks them under her arm. She leaves the books where they are, all of them.

For a moment before she leaves she stands in the centre of the room, and her body is in the midst of mine. We're held there on the same axis; she trembles momentarily, but doesn't lose control of herself. She's done that in other rooms, at other times, and there's no need for it now. I realize that I can no longer remember what Fran looked like. I reach up my hand – or imagine I do – to touch my wife's cheek, for comfort. And I seem to feel a very small hand touch my cheek.

As she leaves, I know that nothing is lost.





**Paul M. Grunwell** is 35, lives in Leeds, and makes his first *Interzone* appearance with the foregoing story. He has had poetry and short fiction published in various literary magazines and on BBC radio. He is a graduate of Clarion '89 and Clarion West '90, and of Algis Budrys's 1989 "Moscow Moffia" workshop. (He states that Budrys's story "The Distant Sound of Engines" provided the literary inspiration for "Relocation"). Paul writes full-time, and recently completed his first attempt at an sf novel.

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# Shallow Grave

## Diane Mapes

**S**hallow was what Kathryn's sister called her. Shallow as a pan of acid rainwater, a puddle of a person, muddled by superficiality and greed, a stream without depth, pretty to look at but riddled with sharp, annoying stones. A drip, a shoal, an insidiously narcissistic pool.

But Kathryn hardly saw it that way. She was, after all, an artist (and had the community college degree to prove it), a sensitive sort whose designs had been used to promote the mayor's annual Hunger Bash and the City's Football Fundraiser. She'd donated money towards a homeless person and a biking trail around the lake to the north where she lived. And she'd ridden in her sister's Volkswagen van at least twice while she drove through the projects on one silly mission or another for those blacks without once mentioning the N-word.

Kathryn's sister was just a peasant, so Kathryn duly ignored her. Or she tried to at any rate, as Calvin so judiciously advised.

It was hard sometimes, as her sister, a loud-mouthed plump woman with a liking for dangley ridgescent earrings and voluminous straw bags, made herself impossible to ignore. She would corner Kathryn at the New Mall's outdoor market as she was buying fresh salmon and artichokes for one of Calvin's business dinners, her drab brown eyes bright with pedestrian purpose.

"That fish survived the oil spills only to be grilled and lemoned and served up to a bunch of Platinum-Rox pseudo liberals. Better it should suffocate in the sludge along with all the other wildlife. Better you and old Calvin should eat salad and give your money to the City's rescue fund."

"Better you should mind your own business, Barbara," Kathryn would inevitably reply, but her sister would merely shake her head and delve into her purse for another handful of poorly designed pamphlets espousing the latest of her causes.

**K**athryn's sister had many causes. Tonight when she called, it was the druggies again.

"It's only a small donation." Barbara's tone was the same one that had forced Kathryn to acquiesce over the health care business not three months before. "And the Clean Streets movement is an important cause, as I'm sure you know from the flyers I gave you. We have to take responsibility for our City's sick people, Kathryn. We have to help them kick their habits somehow."

"My name is Kathryn now, not Kathy," Kathryn said, wincing at her sister's lapse. "And no matter how important it is, I don't have time for it right now. I've got guests coming in two hours and I still have to shower and get dressed. And Calvin will be here any minute; I have to go."

"Then I'll just put you down for the standard donation. A hundred dollars is really a small price to pay when you're talking about a person's life."

"You'll do no such thing." Kathryn's carefully modulated voice took on an edge. With a hundred dollars she could buy two pairs of shoes. One pair, she chided herself. One pair. Or one of the new Giovanni silk ties Calvin had been ogling. "Calvin and I have donated money to your causes nearly two times already, Barbara. You'll just have to get along without us this time."

"It's not the money that's an issue here, Kathy." Her sister's voice took on its most sanctimonious tone. "It's your soul that I'm worried about. If you could just see the suffering of the children, you wouldn't be so complacent. You're stagnating with that man, I tell you. Stagnating."

Kathryn sighed, glancing again at her watch. Barbara never could understand obligations; she was still having trouble with the concept of private ownership. Her sister started in on one of her usual rants about big business and the poor oppressed people of the City and the world, and Kathryn finally hung up just as she launched into her corruption-rules-the-day speech again.

Sure, starving babies in the projects are a tragedy, Kathryn thought, padding up the stairs. Why, they're a downright shame. But I've got my own problems to worry about, such as how to assure Calvin's success with Meeker, Meeker and Cavanaugh.

"Not showered yet?" Calvin jogged into the bedroom behind her, the thighs of his nylon warmup suit whispering like crisp fifties.

"Just about to, love. Barbara called."

Calvin looked up from his jogging shoes. "Her timing always was impeccable. What was it this time? Save the white lab rats? Legal aid for poets?"

Kathryn slipped out of her jumpsuit and reached for a padded, scented hanger. "Same thing tonight as always, something about the drug movement down in the projects. She wants us to pledge funds towards helping them kick their habits."

"More like supply their habits." Calvin stripped down to his black satin boxers and darted into the bathroom. "I won't be a minute."



Calvin's voice carried over the spray of the shower as Kathryn searched through her closet for a dress. "Say, darling. You know, I don't mind you giving Barbara money for candy bars for cancer kids or a new shelter for the elephants—especially considering old man Meeker's political inclination—but you will keep away from the activist stuff, won't you? You never know when something like that might backfire."

Kathryn pulled out the red backless, held it up to her shoulders and gazed in the mirror. "Like with the Sendeks, you mean?" She considered the colour then hung it back up in the closet. Perhaps she should hold off on red tonight, it might make her look too much a Communist.

"Exactly. Carol would have gotten that promotion if they hadn't found all those political contributions in her data file. Sure, they were dated, well, at least some of them were, but you know how old man Meeker feels about radicals."

"I know, I know. A lawyer can't afford to get involved with causes." Kathryn took out the black cocktail dress she'd gotten for the MacGruder party two months ago (the one Calvin had chided her for buying on sale) and held it up to her shoulders, frowning. Black always made her look so gaunt and depressed, like a widow in mourning. Her frown grew to a pout. Widows. Like the women Barbara was always going on and on about down in Guatemala, the ones who were trying to find their husbands' bodies so they could prove they'd been murdered by the government. Widows. Like she'd been just three years ago, before Calvin had come along and swept her off her

feet. She hung the black cocktail dress back in the closet. No time for mourning tonight; she was giving a party.

"You didn't invite them, did you?"

"Who?" Kathryn called, reaching for the aquamarine. It matched her eyes perfectly and moulded to her like water. Pretty clothes were so much more pleasant to think about than drug addicts dying in the streets. Maybe if Barbara went shopping more...

"The Sendeks." Calvin's voice held a trace of uncertainty. "The scuttlebutt is that Carol's on the way out now. Got to keep the machine strong, you know. No room for crazies in the corporation."

Kathryn smiled nervously. "Wasn't I supposed to invite them?"

There was silence from the shower, only the sound of splashing water.

She waited another minute, then laughed, a brittle sound. "Oh, quit your worrying, Calvin. They're not coming." She glanced at her watch. There was still time to call and beg off before they arrived. Another migraine headache, she nodded to herself. That would do the trick. Or maybe she could tell her the cook had been shot. The Cavanaugh's had lost one only last week. Those Latino types were always killing each other. There was no cause for panic yet, she had time to get out of it.

"You'd better hurry." Calvin padded out of the shower, water curling his thick black hair like it had after their daily swims in Acapulco. Kathryn missed the pleasant beaches of Mexico, even poverty looked pretty down there. If only Barbara could see Acapulco...

"I would have been done already if you hadn't snuck in ahead of me." She grabbed a fresh towel and took Calvin's place in the bathroom.

Leaning over the tub, she adjusted the water and turned on the spray, then slipped out of her robe, climbed in and closed the clear shower door behind her. Outside the bathroom, she could hear Calvin whistling to himself, in perfect pitch as always. Everything about Calvin was perfect: his teeth, his hair, his job, the way he subscribed to *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*, even though he rarely had time to read either, the way he knew how to pronounce all the fancy French typefaces she ordered for her clients' graphic designs. Best of all, Calvin really believed in her and her talent as a graphic artist, nothing like her first husband who had been so wrapped up in his own artistic angst that he could never show any appreciation for a particularly clean bit of white space or a nicely bled colour. Perhaps it was just as well that Derrick was dead; suicide made for a lousy social life, but there had been the money from his paintings to console her.

"What are you going to wear?" Calvin's voice sounded oddly faint, as if diminished by the steam billowing around her body. Kathryn was glad for the interruption. Thinking about her first husband always depressed her. She hadn't been able to wear scarves since:

"The aquamarine," she called back, bending over to adjust the water pressure. It was coming out too hard, too hot, the water pelting her with stinging spray, cutting into her delicately oiled skin the same way her sister had cut into her for not forking over that hundred dollars.

Kathryn scowled, fumbling with the taps. Stagnating, her sister had said. As if she weren't doing better than the rest of the people in the damn city, as if she weren't constantly advancing in her career and social standing. Just because she and Calvin had more money than most people didn't mean they had to waste it on every unfortunate wretch who couldn't get a handle on their drug habit. She'd worked hard for that money, or at least she'd stood by while Derrick and Calvin had worked for it (as much as anybody who skated over canvas with sponges tied to their feet ever worked); she wasn't about to throw it all down the drain now, just for the sake of a guilty conscience.

The water pressure increased and Kathryn winced, fiddling with the adjustable shower head.

"Hey, what did you do to the shower?" she called to Calvin, her voice coming out gravelly, like the gurgle of water deep in the pipes. She coughed and cleared her throat. "It feels like it's tearing me apart."

"I didn't do anything. It was fine when I was in there."

"Well, it's not fine now." Kathryn dropped her arms and blinked, a strange liquid sensation overwhelming her. A messiah complex, that's what Barbara's problem was. She thought everybody needed saving and she was just the person to do it. Thank God, I'm not like that, Kathryn told herself. There were just too many people in the world with problems - and most of them seemed to be in their city - and she had problems of her own. Impossible deadlines, unwieldy help, not to mention the little matter (real little, she

suppressed a giggle) of Calvin's impotency, although the lavishness of his gifts more than made up for that inconvenience.

The steam suddenly grew thicker and she tried to draw a breath, but found she couldn't. Turn the water off, she thought, you're hyperventilating and need to get air, but her arms wouldn't move. Looking down, she couldn't even see her arms. Or her legs. Something is wrong, her mind told her distantly. The steam's not that thick. She felt herself start to fall and tried to call for help but merely took in more water.

"Would my blue serge match?" Calvin's voice was a distant echo above her, muffled and distorted as it had sounded when she snorkelled beneath the shallow waters of Acapulco, which she did frequently to avoid the poor beach children selling Chicklets.

Kathryn tried to answer but could only gurgle. "The blue serge, Kath?" Calvin asked again. "What do you think?" It was the last thing Kathryn heard before she swirled down the drain.

Darkness. Dankness. Kathryn felt about her for a handhold, but her fingers were gone, hands, too. She was spread thin, stretched and liquefied. She was water and she was moving. Moving.

Gurgle, swirling, rolling down through cylindrical bending pipes, rushing around hair-clogged corners (hadn't Calvin warned her about that? Calvin?), flowing over bloody pockets of lime and rust, sucked and stretched, her limbs gone, her eyes as well, her consciousness condensed within a few gallons of soapy, tepid water. Kathryn screamed but the sound merely warped, echoing off the corners of the ever-twisting pipes with a strangled mutter.

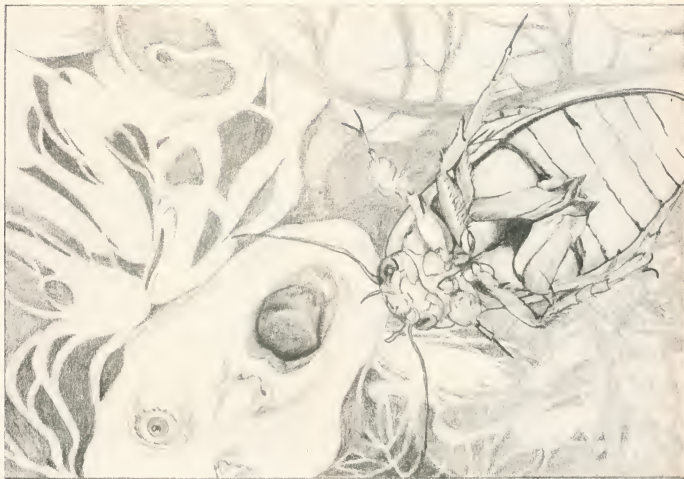
She was swept along, torpid with shock. A beetle scuttled through the narrow crusted opening towards her and Kathryn screamed again, feeling its hard-shelled body pass through her, feeling its cold inhumanity, the inquisitive sweep of its antennae, the finality of its chittering mandibles.

Slimy pipes, sludge, green and thick with organisms. Kathryn passed over more beetles, cockroaches, thick clumps of green that fluttered as she moved by, waving, waving, like the pretty red kelp she'd floated over in Acapulco while dreaming about the condominium she and Calvin would own in the suburbs, about the Scandinavian furniture they'd fill it with, about the gallery openings and charity wine auctions, about the tremendous amount of money she would make when she finally sold Derrick's "lost" work.

The pipe angled down sharply, then enlarged and Kathryn felt herself dissipate along with those dreams of long ago, pushed along by gravity, hurrying, hurrying, unable to stop, or scream or question. A rat struggled at a bend in the pipe, thrashing in the water, thrashing through her, clawing at the slimy coated walls of the pipe for a purchase. Purchase. Kathryn tried again to stop herself, flexing aerobically honed muscles that were no longer there, scratching with immaculately manicured fingernails that had since disappeared.

Then just follow, she told herself. Just follow, go with the flow (she laughed again, although the only sound was that of water passing through pipes). Follow, like she had when Calvin told her to snort the





cocaine Felicia Cavanaugh had offered her at the company Christmas party last year, a snaking white line that curved across an etched mirror image of Jane Fonda naked save a santa hat and red high heels. Follow, like Calvin had whispered to her when Mark Cavanaugh had led her off to the bedroom to grope at her breasts and slobber at the nape of her neck, his eyes glassy, his advances tolerable only because of the lucrative career possibilities that lurked behind them.

The laughter subsided and Kathryn calmed herself, letting that cool pleasant thought – Follow – pulse through her, shutting out the bugs and the rats and the crawling life that coated the walls of the pipes around her. Follow was how she had survived in life so far, following Derrick's lead into a trendy artworld subculture rife with prima-donna painters and lecherous art critics, following Calvin's advice in abandoning the Bohemian circle save for the few connections that would further her graphic-arts career, following her colleagues' example by churning out a constant stream of acceptably slick and facile designs for consistently exorbitant prices.

More junctions, more bends and she felt herself spread out further, felt the warmth of oily bath water and urine as more pipes dumped into the main passage, smelled the waste and pushed through the wads of toilet tissue and excrement. The pipes were larger now and she could hear sounds, splashes, chittering, the squeaks of rats as they warred and mated. Sometimes there were cries, sometimes drunken voices.

I am mad, she thought, hurrying through the pipes, past rats and worms and floating debris: tampons,

Hostess pie wrappers, bits of clothing and cigarette butts. I am having a nightmare, I am standing in my shower hallucinating all of this. Calvin has poisoned me, yes. He wants my money so he can leave the country with Felicia Cavanaugh and become the new drug baron of Colombia. I have seen the iciness of his glances, felt the boredom in his touch. He treats me like a law brief, delving into me out of necessity only, his fingers rifling my pages never for the sake of discovery but for reference alone. I am mad, yes, and he has driven me mad in order to cultivate the sympathies of the new legal assistant down at the office; he'll keep me in the attic locked away, he always liked Jane Eyre.

**K**athryn swept through the pipes, knocking beetles out of her path, driving the water through the lungs of a rat as it wriggled in a narrow pipe opening.

She won't have him, she thought viciously. He is mine. Mine. My Ivy League lawyer, my marathon runner, my handsome connoisseur of wine and cheese and post-minimalist art. He chose me, out of all the others that he could have had, the secretaries, the legal aides, the public defenders and clerks. Me, because of my looks, he said, my abundance of charms, because of my artistic abilities, my incomparable talent with a pica pole and glue stick. No one else can have him, no one ever.

Her momentum slowed, her anger dispelled, and Kathryn found she had entered a dark chamber, her body (such as it was) slowly spinning towards the centre. A gentle force tugged at her, nudging her

towards the outer edge, and she saw the rusted mesh of a grill as she passed through. The still body of a rat butted against the grill and stopped.

Machinery hummed around her and she felt blades churning through her, through the water, chopping up the waste, pushing it on faster, faster. Light poured through the tunnel and she felt/smelled the presence of organisms, green microscopic life that nibbled away at her, purifying her; she tasted chemicals, chlorine and potassium. For a moment, she felt herself slow to a near stop and she reached out with fingers of liquid.

"Have I stopped then?" Her thoughts radiated out like ripples in a puddle. A used condom bobbed by, her only answer.

Kathryn sputtered and swirled away, her body encircling another grill. A small salamander clung to the top portion of it, staring down and through her, its eyes as cold and unfeeling as Calvin's when she asked to look at the gallery receipts last month.

"What is this place?" Kathryn called up to it. "Why am I here?" Her only answer was a flickering tongue and cool accusatory stare.

Again, she was sucked away and she passed through more mesh, more passageways, through light, and into pipes clogged with minerals, yet free of slime. She flowed through them, pushed by the forces of gravity and the pumps, hurrying hurrying, her presence narrowing, elongating, pulsating until, with a sudden gush, she burst through a tiny silver mesh into the bone white of porcelain.

"Calvin!" she screamed as his reflection caught on the gentle ripple of her face. "Help me, Calvin! Please." But Calvin stood stupidly above her, his attention occupied with the green strand of dental floss dangling from between his fine white teeth.

"It wouldn't have been so bad except for the business with the abortion marches back in '79," he said, his head inclined towards the shower. "You know how old man Meeker feels about that, especially with Carol being a woman and all. It's too bad for her, I mean she would have had an excellent career ahead of her, but that's how it goes in this business. You've got to cover yourself at all cost."

Kathryn watched him lean forward towards the mirror, his torso blocking out her view of his face. "Calvin, please," she screamed up at him. "Forget Carol Sendek, something's happened to me!" But Calvin did not answer, he merely leaned closer, fiddling with the floss. After a moment, he reached down and grabbed the toothbrush, sprinkling it with tooth powder.

"You better hurry up in there, Kath. Otherwise you'll have to use the hair dryer and your hair will be all frizzed out. Last time it did that you looked like Don King."

"I'm not in there, I'm down here Calvin! Right in front of you. Help me, please!" Kathryn watched her husband watch himself in the mirror, his eyes never straying to the steamed shower curtain. How could he not notice she was gone? How could he be so insensitive?

He began to brush his teeth, up and down, side to side, and Kathryn, trapped in the basin below him,

watched him do so, noting how his eyes constantly appraised his reflection. When he had finished, he tucked the toothbrush back into the ceramic rack, his hand reaching down towards her.

He heard me, she thought. He's going to help me, restore me, change me back. Then his hand dipped into the water, his face came at her suddenly and she was inside him, her essence swished through his foamy mouth, around the capped white teeth, over the tongue still tart with the red wine he'd snuck before coming upstairs to shower, back behind the molars where the bits of decaying almonds and brie hid from the dental floss and the brush, drawn back down his throat and gargled, the stench of gastric juices and preservatives overpowering her.

Sure, she would have had an excellent career ahead of her, she felt his thoughts, but at the expense of mine. And old man Meeker didn't need that much persuasion. He was just looking for an excuse to oust the bitch. Who knows, she might have had an abortion, it wasn't a total impossibility. Everybody knew any woman who supported those baby killers had killed one herself.

"Calvin," Kathryn whispered, "please. You must know I'm here. You must feel me. You said we were soulmates when we were together in Acapulco. Get me out of this mess, lover. I'll do anything for you. Anything."

Oh come on, bitch, his thoughts went on, washing over her like acid. How long are you going to stay in the shower? It's not like soap and hot water's going to help those thighs. Good thing Cavanaugh's never seen you without your clothes on, I'd have never gotten him to come over here tonight. Oh Felicia, Felicia, why do you tease me so? I can't keep telling Kathryn I'm impotent. She's stupid, but not that stupid. I want you, Felicia. I want your tight brown legs around my waist. I want your strawberry lips around my cock.

"Calvin," Kathryn screamed, churning inside his throat. "No. No."

She's a pig, Felicia. Calvin's thoughts were a knife of hot metal, searing her, destroying her, turning her into useless air, like steam rising from a vat of cooking entrails. And not even a fuckable one, like her sister. Don't you know what hell it is to sleep with her each night? To feel the stubble of her stocky little legs, to hear her blather on about her contrived little designs. She's got no class, Felicia. Not like you. And she doesn't even have the sense to realize I'm using her. The paintings are gone now, the money all used up, but your fine canvas has yet to be explored. Oh God, Felicia, you could do so much more for me. So much more now. I swear I'd kill her tonight if I could just fuck you once more.

Kill, Kathryn thought and drove herself down the back of Calvin's throat. Die, bastard, die, she thought, cutting off his air, feeling him choke and struggle as she forced herself downward into his lungs. No one calls me untalented. No one calls me fat. You're the one who had to have his suits taken out last month. You're the one who thought green was a primary colour.

Calvin's thrashing slowly subsided and she felt his body go limp and crumple to the floor.

That's right, Calvin, Kathryn purred over the

guttural of his sputters and coughs. Let's see you talk yourself out of this one. Let's see you argue away this death sentence. But Calvin did not argue in the least, he merely shuddered once more and then was still.

And Kathryn, puddled in the sacs of his lungs, settled to a chilly stillness and reflected on something her sister had said earlier that night. Stagnating was the word Barbara had used. She was stagnating with that man.



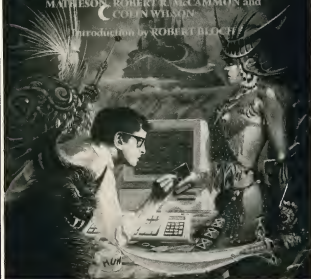
Diane Mapes grew up on a strawberry farm in the Pacific Northwest, and has lived in and around Seattle for most of her life. At present she is "paying the rent by writing various fluffy features and a humour column for the local weekly." The above story represents her first sale to *Interzone*, but she has previously written sf and fantasy for the short-lived magazine *Argos*, for the Canadian sf journal *On Spec*, and, more recently, for Isaac Asimov's *SF Magazine* and *Pulp-house*.

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# Postmodern Palaeontology

## Bruce Sterling

This is a very ordinary day, a day like a million others. We have a sea-breeze, fluffy racks of distant cloud, the mutter of surf, tropical sunshine. We are standing on a northern shore of the continent of Laurentia, during the Cambrian Period of the Paleozoic Era. This is Earth, our home planet. For those who care about such matters, the year happens to be 531,074,335 B.C.

It's difficult to specify the month and day, as the Cambrian Earth spins more quickly on its axis than our calendars can manage. But on a lazy tropical morning like this one, it's hard to quibble. We are, after all, mammalian bipeds from a distant epoch. Here we are utterly anomalous and profoundly alone.

We are the only land-dwelling entities; no native life survives outside the water. The air is breathable, though it stinks a bit – mud, salt, the reek of exotic slimes. There is nothing happening on land; just a few hardy species of bacteria infesting Laurentia's freshwater ponds. An awesome silence reigns; no birds, no bugs. Just empty wind and rain. Volcanoes sometimes, earthquakes, sundering continents, the occasional meteor strike; but that's only on a geologic time-scale. Day by day, it's as boring here on land as barren rock can be. Let's head down to the beach.

There's sand here. It looks just like any normal sort of sea-sand. Where the tides keep the beach damp, there are some blue-green fungal-looking stains, and a few filament-like wormy organisms. Nothing big enough to bite our bare feet, thank goodness.

Cast-up seashells heap the littoral. Some shells – cones, caps, cryptic little twists – are the chalky kind of shell we're used to seeing, but many more are brown, slick, plastic-looking stuff. It's chitin, warped and spotty. Mostly trilobite moults. Here and there, the broken spiny arms of archaic sponges. Withered ribbonlike marine worms, all feathery legs and unlikely jaws. No fishbones, though. Nothing has evolved bones as yet. Here's a whole dead trilobite, mummifying in the sunshine. Looks kind of like the sole of a moon-boot.

Now we put on our aqualungs and

go swimming. Don't worry; the biggest predator here is only two feet long, although it looks like a gelatinous lobster designed by Hieronymus Bosch. We swim out through the blood-warm water till we reach a big reef. No such thing as "coral" yet. This "reef" is a gigantic miles-long stony precipice coated by a thick living layer of blue-green slime. Various sorts of whip-antennae vermin eat this slime, and all kinds of fascinating weird boneless wrigglers dwell in the reef's various warts and nooks and crannies. These stromatolite algae have silently flourished here for tens of thousands of years, building this vast limestone wave-break. Now it's Laurentia's great barrier reef.

We're climbing over it to the far side now. Watch your step.

Now we've reached the shelf of the open Cambrian ocean. Endless sea-currents have piled a vast expanse of rich mud against the ancient deep-buried limestone roots of the slime-reef. There's a whole eco-system thriving here. Basically, this is the cutting-edge of contemporary life on Earth. The currents keep the oxygen and nutrients and plankton washing in – well, you can hardly call it "plankton" yet, but it's a blooming primal soup – and there are creatures here so utterly astonishing that they defy human imagination. Let's take a good close look, shall we? Let's pick this completely normal, unremarkable, representative slope of the mud-shelf. Note these colourful webs of algae and hosts of little creeping slithering wonders...

Uh-oh. What a disappointment! Our chosen slope of mud has suffered a sudden landslide! Before our crestfallen eyes, an area about the size of a city block just sheared loose quite suddenly, rumbled away downslope in a kind of slow-motion underwater avalanche. Bugs, wonders, algae and all, it tumbled headlong into a nearby canyon. An ugly place indeed, this canyon. A malodorous, anoxic, sulphurous sump. A backwater, an eddy along the slime-reef, where the sea grows stagnant... Nothing down there but blackness and bubbling ooze and a sulphur stink of rotten eggs.

Now we'll never get to see it! It's vanished for good, this little patch of

ecosystem. Buried. Entombed. Lost forever.

Well, not forever. What the heck. We'll wait.

Epochs pass. A few more landslides over the centuries, and the sump fills up with sludge. Beneath the growing weight, the mud flattens, transmuted, over eons, into hard dry slate. So vile was that poisoned mud that none of our creatures have successfully decayed; they're one-and-all squashed as flat as a floppy-disk, but preserved in exquisite detail. The carbon stains of their boneless carcasses are gently leached out in some geologic alchemy, faithfully replaced by weird shiny silicates of aluminium and calcium. Seas rise and fall, continents crack and split and pivot and collide, mountains leap up like toadstools and are gnawed away. Even the Sun looks oddly different now...shrunkened? Less spotty? Hard to say.

Our wait is over. We are now on the continent of North America, in British Columbia, Dominion of Canada, on Wapta Mountain in the Rocky Mountain Range. It is August 30, 1909 A.D. Here comes Dr Charles W. Walcott, a great prince of American science, the executive secretary of the wealthy and powerful Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Our friend Dr Walcott is a ramrod-straight professional gentleman of 59 years, in a broadbrimmed hat, linen shirt, waistcoat, gold watch-chain, black tie, puttees, and hobnailed walking-boots.

Dr Walcott knows very well what he is looking for: Cambrian shale. Actually, in this lovely summer, he has brought his entire family with him to the scenic Rocky Mountains, for a well-deserved breather from his pressing scholarly responsibilities. But our Dr Walcott, a decisive and thoroughly organized man, makes even Leisure the handmaid of Science. With his sharp iron prybars, his hammers, drills, and blasting-caps, his pack-horses and meticulous notebooks, Dr Walcott knows our shale at once when he has found it. When he carefully splits a layered volume of the smooth dark rock, he knows what he has found in Canada: perhaps the most profoundly important fossil-mine in history. When he examines those shiny



ghostlike films, Dr Walcott even thinks that he knows what he sees. He has found, he believes, the primitive precursors of modern life. Dr Walcott is a thoroughly modern palaeontologist.

**W**e abandon our scene-setting. Now it is 1990. Dr Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard professor, evolutionary theorist, and popular writer on natural history, is a postmodern palaeontologist. Gould's book *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (Century Hutchinson), is an assessment of what Walcott found and what it means. Its intent is radically revisionary.

The heroes of Gould's book are Harry B. Whittington, Simon Conway Morris, and Derek Briggs, three British palaeontological scholars. In the 1970s, this trio turned their formidable patience and skill to a deep re-assessment of Dr Walcott's "primitive" "ancestral" fossils. Armed with binocular microscopes and dental drills, they took many specimens apart flake by gleaming flake – something that the great Walcott, overwhelmed by the cares of office, never had time to attempt.

And what a zoo these creatures are. The confident Dr Walcott, it seems, had it very wrong. Hypnotized by his doctrines of steady smooth progression up the scale of life's advancement, Walcott interpreted his weird smashed creatures as the "primitive precursors" of later forms: crustaceans, chelicerates, proto-insects and centipedes, worms of many variant affinities. In some cases Walcott was right, for some few Burgess Shale creatures are in fact true precursors of today's major life-groups. But many more were no such thing. These creatures are astoundingly aberrant and bizarre.

Most Burgess specimens are small, multilegged invertebrates. If you saw one creep out from under your bookcase, you'd likely stamp it flat with instinctive mammalian loathing; but if you took a closer look, you'd shriek and leap onto a chair. Gould's book features the brilliantly effective drawings of Canadian artist Marianne Collins. Her stippled re-creations give the Burgess Shale fauna a truly wondrous Lovecraftian immediacy.

Here's a jellied carnivorous entity two feet long, that has a fanged "mouth" that irises shut like the shutter of a camera. There's a thriving, hideous little vermin with five bulging eyes and a barbed vacuum-cleaner nozzle on its head. The prize of the lot, the unspeakably aberrant *Hallucigenia*, was named by 70s grad-student Simon Conway Morris, with perfect aptness. This headless scuttler has seven pairs of spiked leg-struts and double sets of tubelike tentacles mounted along its back. The flexing tentacles are hollow and tipped with

what seem to be little clawlike clashing jaws.

**S**tephen Jay Gould takes pains to assure us that the Burgess Shale is no anomaly. It is simply our finest record of the way Life really was at that time. Life in the Cambrian was a vibrant jungle of wild and unimagined variety; our own epoch, by contrast, is strangely stereotyped and impoverished. The "progress" of evolution is not a stately, advancing tree. Rather, Life on Earth resembles a squat, branching bramble bush – ruthlessly pruned back by mass extinction, time and again, then straggling and wriggling back to cover the earth with the descendants of a few surviving twigs.

There is, Gould tells us, no stately "trend" in evolutionary history. Destiny is nonsense; contingency dominates ruthlessly. Darwin's principle of "survival of the fittest," though it may rule for millions of quiet years, is often swiftly compromised by blistering global disasters that leave only the survival of the luckiest. Life radiates back after each decimation, but much deep variety is lost, expunged, never to return. For a parallel, imagine every nation in the world exterminated, then replaced by lucky survivors from the Azores, Iceland, and Tristan da Cunha.

If we accept this version of the history of life, it carries profound implications for how we see ourselves and how we envision our future. This is why I must call Gould's ideas "post-modern." At the close of the twentieth century, we find ourselves in a social epoch psychologically prepared – eager, even – for cusps, transitions, chaos, and catastrophes.

Postmodern reconceptions of our past are spreading and flourishing throughout the body of contemporary science. We are now prepared to imagine that the dinosaurs were not sluggish brainless monsters, but swift, active, well-adapted, perhaps even warm-blooded creatures, unluckily destroyed in a single ghastly moment by a giant random asteroid. We can believe today that the Pleistocene megafauna – ground sloths, mammoths, giant bison, glyptodonts and such, sometimes featured in cave-paintings – were exterminated by hungry prehistoric tribes with fire and flint spears. We can seriously envision the prospect that Earth's earliest multicellular life-forms – the "Ediacaran fauna," odd creatures of the remote pre-Cambrian that resemble small carpets and bubble-packs – left no descendants at all, but were utter failures, completely exterminated, simply wiped off the evolutionary slate entirely.

And why shouldn't we find these notions plausible? At this moment, we ourselves are exterminating whole

ecosystems root and branch: thousands of species. The flames and bulldozers of the Amazon take no pity on the exquisite Darwinian adaptations of the ancient fauna there. Though the spectre of sudden nuclear annihilation seems to be fading somewhat, we most now live with the even weirder dread that our atmosphere and weather-patterns are mutating out of control, with the direst worldwide implications.

And this is not the half of it. With the advent of genetic engineering, we find ourselves playing ducks and drakes with the biosphere's primal secrets. Within the cultural logic of post-modernism, truly bizarre notions like nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and the invasive demolition and reconstruction of the human mind and body become intellectually fashionable. We possess both the ecstasy of great power and the dread of utter loss of control – with the likelihood that nothing we now know will survive unchanged.

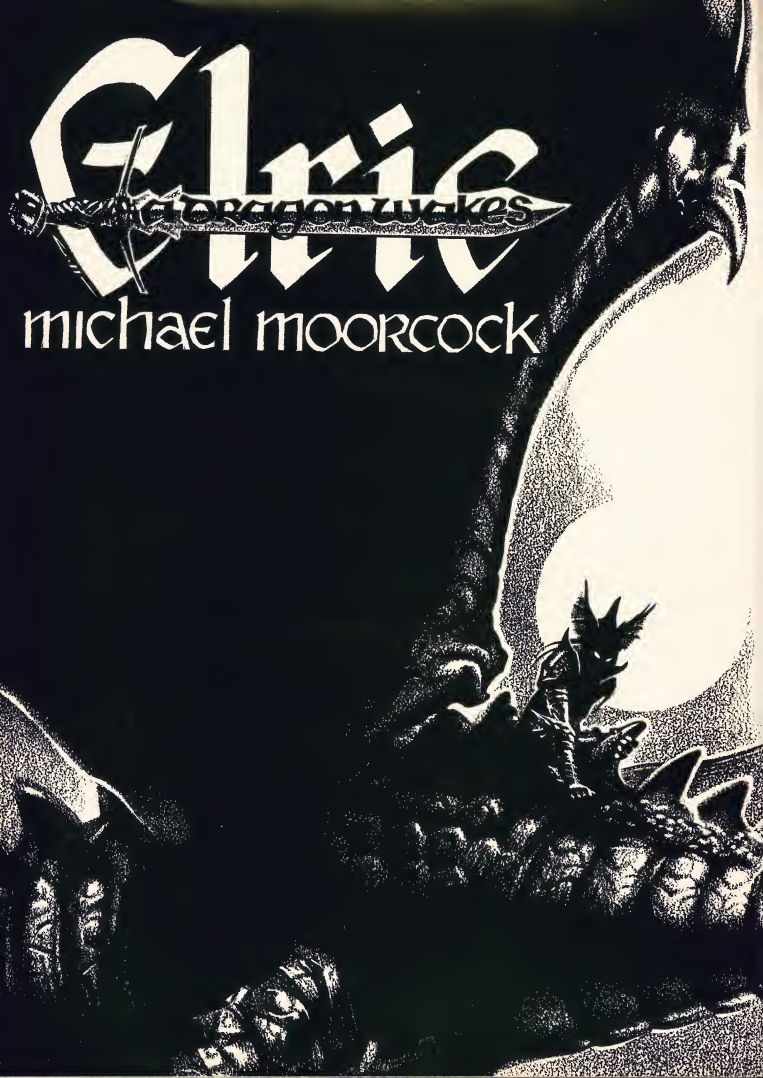
**K**nowing this, then, imagine the future – after a merest shaving of geological time, say another two thousand years. Given our current capabilities and ambitions, it would seem to require outlandish luck for the biosphere, and humankind, to maintain, in that future, any real resemblance to the modern condition. The world two thousand years from now may be marvellous, or perhaps apocalyptic; likely both marvellous and apocalyptic, but in any case, radically transformed. Stephen Jay Gould, like his idolized precursor Charles Darwin, is mentally preparing his society for the transformations that confront it.

Charles Walcott, a man of a more settled and perhaps more civilized epoch, failed to recognize the true nature of his specimens. Still, Walcott was a brilliant scientist, and he could smell the holy dread that waited in the wind. In 1926, less than a year before his death, he wrote to a friend:

"I have felt for several years that there was danger of science running away with the orderly progress of human evolution and bringing about a catastrophe, unless there was some method found of developing to a greater degree the altruistic or, as some would put it, the spiritual nature of man."

How quaint and pious these sentiments seem now – though, as the consequences of our recklessness begin to hit home, they may yet enjoy a powerful revival. After reading Stephen Jay Gould, however, with his bleak but heady embrace of decimating chaos as a basic life-principle, we must wonder, as a species possessed by the aberrance of high intelligence, if our own destiny was ever really in our power to control at all – if we ever even really had a choice.

(Bruce Sterling)



# Elric

the dragon wakes

michael moorcock

He had come in sight of a range of hills the local people dignified as The Teeth of Shenkh, a provincial demon-god, and was following a caravan track down to a collection of shacks surrounded by a mud and timber wall that had been described to him as the great city of Toomoo-Kag-Sanapet-of-the-Invincible-Temple, Capital of Iniquity and Unguessed At Wealth, when he heard a protesting cry at his back and saw a figure tumbling head over heels down the hill towards him while overhead a previously unseen thundercloud sent silver spears of light crashing to the earth, causing Elric's horses to rear and snort in untypical nervousness. Then the world was washed with red-gold light, as if in a sudden dawn, which turned to bruised blue and dark brown before swirling like an angry current towards the horizon and vanishing to leave a few disturbed clouds behind them in a drizzling and depressingly ordinary sky.

Deciding this event was sufficiently strange to merit more than his usually brief attention, Elric turned towards the small, red-headed individual who was picking himself out of a ditch at the edge of the silver-green cornfield, looking nervously up at the sky and drawing a rather threadbare coat about his little body. The coat would not meet at the front, not because it was too tight for him, but because the pockets, inside and out, were crammed with small volumes. On his legs were a matching pair of trews, grey and shiny, a pair of laced black boots, which as he lifted one knee to inspect a rent, revealed stockings as bright as his hair. His face, adorned by an almost diseased-looking beard, was freckled and pale, from which glared blue eyes as sharp and busy as a bird's, above a pointed beak which gave him the appearance of an enormous finch, enormously serious. He drew himself up at Elric's approach and began to stroll casually down the hill.

"D'ye think it will rain, sir? I thought I heard a clap of thunder a moment ago. It set me off my balance." He paused, then cast a look backward up the track. "I thought I had a pot of ale in my hand." He scratched

his wild head. "Come to think of it, I was sitting on a bench outside the Green Man. Hold hard, sir, ye're an unlikely cove to be abroad on Putney Common." Whereupon he sat down suddenly on a grassy hummock. "Good lord! Am I transported yet again?" He appeared to recognize Elric. "I think we've met, sir, somewhere. Or were you merely a subject?"

"You have the advantage of me, sir," said Elric, dismounting. He felt drawn to this birdlike man. "I am called Elric of Melniboné and I am a wanderer."

"My name is Wheldrake, sir. Ernest Wheldrake. I have been travelling somewhat reluctantly since I left Albion, first to Victoria's England, where I made something of a name, before being drawn on to Elizabeth's. I am growing used to sudden departures. What would your business be, Master Elric, if it is not theatrical?"

Elric, finding half what the man said nonsense, shook his head. "I have practised the trade of mercenary sword for some while. And you, sir?"

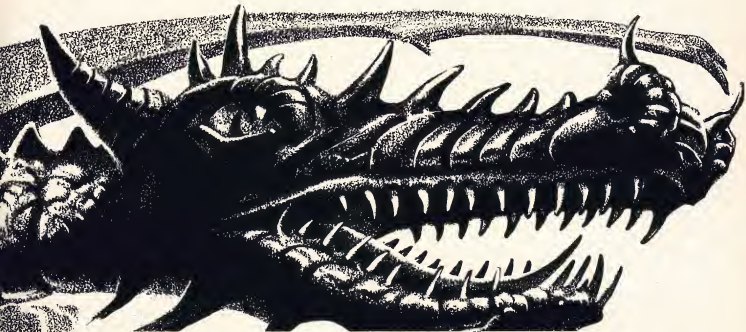
"I, sir, am a poet!" Master Wheldrake bristled and felt about his pockets for a certain volume, failed to find it, made a movement of the fingers as if to say he needed no affidavits, anyway, and settled his scrawny arms across his chest. "I have been a poet of the Court and of the Gutter, it's alleged. I should still be at Court had it not been for Doctor Dee's attempts to show me our Graecian past. Impossible, I have since learned."

"You do not know how you came here?"

"Only the vaguest notion, sir. Aha! But I have placed you." A snap of the long fingers. "A subject, I recall!"

Elric had lost interest in this vein of inquiry. "I am on my way to yonder metropolis, sir, and if you'd ride one of my pack animals, I'd be honoured to take you there. If you have no money, I'll buy you a room and a meal for the night."

"I would be glad of that, sir. Thanks." And the poet hopped nimbly up onto the furthest horse, settling himself amongst the packs and sacks with which Elric had equipped himself for a journey of indeterminate length. "I had feared it would rain and I am prone, these days, to chills..."



Illustrations by Kevin Cullen

**E**lric continued down the long, winding track towards the churned mud streets and filthy log walls of Toomoo-Kag-Sanapet-of-the-Invincible-Temple while in a high-pitched yet oddly beautiful voice, reminiscent of a trilling bird, Wheldrake uttered some lines which Elric guessed were his own composition. "With purpose fierce his heart was gripped, and blade gripped tighter, still, And honour struggling within, 'gainst vengeance, cold and cruel. Old Night and a New Age warred in him; all the ancient power, and all the new. Yet he did not stop his slaughtering. And there is more, sir. He believes that he has conquered himself and his sword. He cries out: 'See, my masters! I force my moral will upon this hellblade and Chaos is no longer served by it! True purpose shall triumph and Justice rule in Harmony with Romance in this most perfect of worlds.' And that, sir, was where my drama ended. Is your own story in any way the same, sir? Perhaps a little?"

"Perhaps a little, sir. I hope you will soon be taken back to whatever demon realm you've escaped from."

"You are offended, sir. In my verse you are a hero! I assure you I had the bones of the tale from a reliable source. A lady. And discretion demands I not reveal her name. Oh, sir! Oh, sir! What a magnificent moment this is for us, when metaphor becomes commonplace reality and the daily round turns into a thing of Fantasy and Myth..."

Scarcely hearing the little man's nonsense, Elric continued towards the town.

"Why, sir, what an odd depression in yonder field," said Wheldrake suddenly, interrupting his own verse. "Do you see it, sir? That odd shape, as if some huge beast presses the corn? Is such a phenomenon common in these parts, sir?"

Elric glanced casually across the corn and was bound to agree that it had, indeed, been forced down across quite a broad area, and not by any obvious human agency. He reined in again, frowning. "I'm a stranger here, also. Perhaps some ceremony takes place, which causes the corn to bend so..."

At which there came a sudden snort, which shook the ground under their feet and half-deafened them. It was as if the field itself had discovered a voice.

"Is this odd to you, sir?" Wheldrake asked, his fingers upon his chin. "It's damned odd to me."

Elric found his hand straying towards the hilt of his runesword. There was a stink in the air which he recognized yet could not at that moment place.

Then there came a kind of crack, a roll like distant thunder, a sigh that filled the air and must have been heard by the whole town below, and then Elric knew suddenly how Wheldrake had entered this realm when he had no real business in it, for here was the creature who had actually created the lightning, bringing Wheldrake in its wake. Here was something supernatural broken through the dimensions to confront him.

**T**he horses began to dance and scream. The mare carrying Wheldrake reared and tried to break from her harness, tangling with the reins of her partner and sending Wheldrake once more tumbling to the ground, while out of the unripe corn, like some sentient manifestation of the Earth itself, all tumbling stones and rich soil and clots of poppies

and half the contents of the field, growing taller and taller and shaking itself free of what had buried it, rose an enormous reptile, with slender snout, gleaming greens and reds; razor teeth; saliva hissing as it struck the ground; faint smokey breath streaming from its flaring nostrils, while a long, thick scaly tail lashed behind it, uprooting shrubs and further ruining the crop upon which that metropolitan wealth was based. There came another clap like thunder and a leathery wing stretched upwards then descended with a noise only a little more bearable than the accompanying stink; then the other wing rose; then fell. It was as if the dragon were being forced from some great, earthen womb - forced through the dimensions, through walls which were physical as well as supernatural; it struggled and raged to be free. It lifted its strangely beautiful head and it shrieked again and heaved again; and its slender claws, sharper and longer than any sword, clashed and flickered in the fading light.

Wheldrake, scrambling to his feet, began to run unceremoniously towards the town and Elric could do nothing else but let his pack animals run with him. The albino was left confronting a monster in no doubt on whom it wished to exercise its anger. Already its sinuous body moved with a kind of monumental grace as it turned to glare down at Elric. It snapped suddenly and Elric was crashing to the ground, blood pumping hugely from his horse's torso as the beast's remains collapsed onto the track. The albino rolled and came up quickly, Stormbringer growling and whispering in his hand, the black runes glowing the length of the blade and the black radiance flickering up and down its edges. And now the dragon hesitated, eyeing him almost warily as its jaws chewed for a few moments upon the horse's head and the throat made a single swallowing movement.

Elric had no other course. He began running towards his massive adversary! The great eyes tried to follow him as he weaved in and out of the corn, and the jaws dripped, shaking their bloody ichor to sear and kill all it touched. But Elric had been raised among dragons and knew their vulnerability as well as their power. He knew, if he could come in close to the beast, there were points at which he might strike and at least wound it. It would be his only chance of survival.

As the monster's head turned, seeking him, the fangs clashing and the great breaths rushing from its throat and nostrils, Elric dashed under the neck and slashed once at the little spot about half-way up its length, where the scales were always soft, at least in Melnibonéan dragons; yet the dragon seemed to sense his stroke and reared back, claws slicing ground and crop like some monstrous scythe, and Elric was flung down by a great clot of earth, half-buried, so that he must now struggle to free himself.

It was at that moment that some movement of the beast's head, some motion of the light upon its leathery lids, gave him pause and his heart leapt in sudden hope.

A memory teased at his lips but would not manifest itself as anything concrete. He found himself forming the High Speech of Old Melniboné, the word for "bondfriend." He was beginning to speak the ancient words of the dragon-calling, the cadences and tunes





to which the beasts might, if they chose, respond.

There was a tune in his head, a way of speaking, and then came a single word again, but this was a sound like a breeze through willows, water through stones; a name.

At which the dragon brought her jaws together with a snap and sought the source of the voice. The iron-sharp wattles on the back of her neck and tail began to flatten and the corners of her mouth no longer boiled with poison.

**S**till deeply cautious, Elric got slowly to his feet and shook the damp earth from his flesh, Stormbringer as eager as always in his hand, and took a pace backward.

"Lady Scarsnout! I am your kin, I am Little Cat. I am your ward and your guider, Scarsnout lady, me!"

The green-gold muzzle, bearing a long-healed scar down the underside of the jaw, gave out an enquiring hiss.

Elric sheathed his grumbling hellblade and made the complicated and subtle gestures of kinship which he had been taught by his father for the day when he should be supreme Dragon Lord of Imrryr, Dragon Emperor of the World.

The dragon-she's brows drew together in something resembling a frown, the massive lids dropped, half-hiding the huge, cold eyes – the eyes of a beast more ancient than any mortal being; more ancient, perhaps, than the Gods...

The nostrils, into which Elric could have crawled without much difficulty, quivered and sniffed – a tongue flickered – a great, wet leathery thing, long and slender and forked at the end. Once it almost touched Elric's face, then flickered over his body before the head was drawn back and the eyes stared down in fierce enquiry. For the moment, at least, the monster was calm.

Elric, virtually in a trance by now, as all the old incantations came flooding into his brain, stood swaying before the dragon. Soon her own head swayed, too, following the albino's movements.

And then, all at once, the dragon made a small noise deep in her belly and lowered her head to stretch her neck along the ground, down upon the torn and ruined corn. The eyes followed him as he stepped closer, murmuring the Song of Approach which his father had taught him when he was eleven and first taken to Melniboné's Dragon Caves. Her dragons slept there to this day. A dragon must sleep a hundred years for every day of activity, to regenerate that strange metabolism which could create fiery saliva strong enough to destroy cities.

How this jill-dragon had awakened and how she had come here was a mystery. Sorcery had brought her, without doubt. But had there been any reason for her arrival, or had it been, like Wheldrake's, a mere incidental to some other spell-working?

Elric had no time to debate that question now as he moved in gradual, ritualized steps towards the natural ridge just above the place where the leading part of her wing joined her shoulder. It was where the Dragon Masters of Melniboné had placed their saddles and where, as a youth, he had ridden naked, with only his skill and the good will of the dragon to keep him safe.

It had been many years, and a shattering sequence of events, which had led him to this moment, when all the world was on the change, when he no longer trusted even his memories... The dragon almost called now, almost purred, awaiting his next command, as if a mother tolerated the games of her children.

"Scarsnout, sister, Scarsnout kin, your dragon blood is mixed in ours and ours in yours and we are coupled, we are kind; we are one, the dragon rider and the dragon steed; one ambition, mutual need. Dragon sister, dragon matron, dragon honour, dragon pride..." The Old Speech rolled, trilled and clicked from his tongue; it came without conscious thought; it came without effort, without hesitation, for blood recalled blood and all else was natural. It was natural to climb upon the dragon's back and utter the ancient, joyful songs of command, the complex Dragon Lays of his remote predecessors which combined their highest arts with their most practical needs. Elric was recollecting what was best and noblest in his own people and in himself and even as he celebrated this, he mourned the self-obsessed creatures they had become, using their power merely to preserve their power and that, he supposed, was true decay...

And now the jill's slender neck rises, swaying like a mesmerized cobra, by degrees, and her snout tilts towards the sun, and her long tongue tastes the air and her saliva drips more slowly to devour the ground it touches and a great sigh, like a sigh of contentment, escapes her belly and she moves one hind leg, then the next, swaying and tilting like a storm-tossed ship, with Elric clinging on for his life, his body banged and rolled this way and that, until at last Scarsnout is poised, her claws folding tight as her hind legs rear. Yet still she seems to hesitate. Then she tucks her forelegs into the silk-soft leather of her stomach, and again she tests the air.

Her back legs give a kind of hop. The massive wings crack once, deafeningly. Her tail lashing out to steady her uneven weight, she has risen – she is aloft and mounting – mounting through those miserable clouds into blue perfection, a late afternoon sky, with the clouds below now, like white and gentle hills and valleys where perhaps the harmless dead find peace; and Elric does not care where the dragon flies. He is glad to be flying as he flew as a boy – sharing his joy with his dragon-mate, sharing his senses and his emotions, for this is the true union between Elric's ancestors and their beasts – a union which had always existed and whose origins were explained only in unlikely legends – this was the symbiosis with which, natural and joyful at first, they had learned to defend themselves against would-be conquerors and later, turned conquerors, with which they had overwhelmed all victims. Having become greedy for even more conquests than were offered by the natural world, they sought supernatural conquests also and thus came to make their bond with Chaos, with Duke Arioch himself. And with Chaos to aid them they ruled ten thousand years; their cruelties refined but never abated.

Before then, thinks Elric – before then my people had never thought of war or power. And he knows that it was this respect for all life which must have

brought about the original bond between Melnibonéan and dragon. And, as he lies along the natural pommel, the ridge above his jill's neck, he weeps with the wonder of suddenly recollected innocence, of something he believed lost as everything else is lost to him and which makes him believe, if only for this moment, that what he has lost might be, perhaps, restored...

Then he is free! Free in the air! Part of that impossible monster whose wings carry her as if she were a wind-dancing kestrel, light as down, through darkening skies, her skin giving off a sweetness like lavender and her head set in an expression which seems in a way to mirror Elric's own, and she turns and dives, she climbs and wheels while Elric clings without any seeming effort to her back and sings the wild old songs of his ancestors who had come as nomads of the worlds to settle here and had, some said, been welcomed by an even older race whom they superseded and with whom the royal line intermarried.

Up speeds Scarsnout, up she flies, and, when the air grows so thin it can no longer support her and Elric shivers in spite of his clothing and his mouth gasps at the atmosphere, down she goes in a mighty, rushing plummet until she brings herself up as if to land upon the cloud, then veers slowly away to where the clouds now break to reveal a moon-lit tunnel in the surface and down this Scarsnout plunges while behind her lightning flashes once and a thunder clap seems to seal the tunnel as they descend into an unnatural coldness which makes Elric's whole skin writhe and his bones feel as if they must split and crack within him and yet still the albino does not fear, because the dragon does not fear.

Above them now the clouds have vanished. A blue velvet sky is further softened by a large yellow moon, whose light casts their long shadows upon the rushing meadowlands below, while the horizon shows a glint of the midnight sea and is filled with the emerald points of stars, and only as he begins to recognize the landscape below him does Elric know fear.

The dragon has carried him back to the ruins of his dreams, his past, his love, his ambitions, his hope.

She has brought him back to Melniboné.

She has brought him home.

Now Elric forgot his recent joy and remembered only his pain. He wondered wildly if this was mere coincidence or had the jill-dragon been sent to bring him here? Had his surviving kinfolk struck upon a means of capturing him so as to savour the slowness of his tortured passing? Or did the dragons themselves demand his presence?

Soon the familiar hills gave way to the Plain of Imrryr and Elric saw a city ahead – a ragged outline of burned and mutilated buildings. Was this the city of his birth, the Dreaming City he and his raiders had murdered?

As they flew closer Elric began to realize that he did not recognize the buildings. At first he thought they had been transformed by fire and siege, but they were not even, he noticed now, of the same materials. And he laughed at himself. He marvelled at his secret longings which had made him believe the dragon had brought him to Melniboné.

But then he knew he recognized the hills and

woods, the line of the coast beyond the city. He knew that this was once, at least, where Imrryr stood. As Scarsnout sailed to a gentle landing, hopping once to steady herself, Elric looked across half a mile of familiar grassy ridges and knew that he looked not upon Imrryr the Beautiful, the greatest of all cities, but upon a city his people had called H'hui'shan, the City of the Island, in the High Melnibonéan tongue, and this was the city destroyed in one night in the only Civil War Melniboné had ever known, when her Lords quarrelled over whether to compact themselves with Chaos or remain loyal to the Balance. That War had lasted three days and left Melniboné hidden by oily black smoke for a month. When it had risen it had revealed ruins, but all who sought to attack her when she was weak were more than disappointed, for her pact was made and Arioch aided her, demonstrating the fearful variety of his mighty powers (there had been further suicides in Melniboné as her unhonourable victories rose, while others fled through the dimensions into foreign realms). The cruellest remained to relish an ever-tightening grip upon their world-emcompassing empire.

At least, that was one of his people's legends, said to be drawn from the Dead God's Book.

Elric understood that Scarsnout had brought him to the remote past. But how had the dragon found the means of travelling so easily between the spheres? And, again he wondered, why had he been transported here?

**H**oping Scarsnout might choose some further ation, Elric sat upon the monster's back for a while until it became obvious that the dragon had no intention of moving further, so with some reluctance he dismounted, murmured the song of "I-would-appreciate-your-continuing-concern-in-this-matter" and, there being nothing else for it, began to stride towards the desolate ruins of his people's earliest glories.

"Oh, H'hui'shan, City of the Island, if only I were here a week earlier, to warn thee of thy bond's consequences. But doubtless it would not suit my patron Arioch to let me thwart him so." And he smiled sardonically at this; smiled at his own aching need to make the past produce a finer present: one in which he did not bear such a burden of guilt.

"Perhaps our entire history is of Arioch's writing!" His bargain with the Duke of Hell was a pact of blood and human souls for aid – whatever the runesword did not feast upon belonged to Duke Arioch (though some old tales would have it that sword and patron demon were one and the same). And Elric rarely disguised his distaste for this tradition, which even he lacked the courage to break. It was immaterial to his patron what he thought so long as he continued to honour their bond. And this Elric understood profoundly.

The turf was still crossed by the trails he had known as a boy. He trod them as surely as he had done when, he recollected, his father – distant upon a charger – called to some servitor to take care with the child but to let him walk. He must grow up to remember every pathway that existed in Melniboné; for in those trails and tracks, those roads and highs, lay the configuration of their history, the geometry of their wisdom,

the very key to their most secret understandings.

All these pathways, as well as the pathways to the otherworlds, Elric had memorized, together, where necessary, with their accompanying songs and gestures. He was a master-sorcerer, of a line of master-sorcerers, and he was proud of his calling, though disturbed by the uses to which he, as well as others, had put their powers. He could read a thousand meanings in a certain tree and its branches, but he still failed to understand his own torments of conscience, his moral crises, and that was why he wandered the world.

Dark sorceries and spells, images of horrific consequence, filled his head and threatened sometimes, when he dreamed, to seize control of him and plunge him into eternal madness. Dark memories. Dark cruelties. Elric shuddered as he drew close to the ruins, whose towers of wood and brick had collapsed and yet attained a picturesque and almost welcoming aspect, even in the moonlight.

He clambered over the burned rubble of a wall and entered a street which, at ground level, still bore some resemblance to the thing it had been. He sniffed sooty air and felt the ground still warm beneath his feet. Here and there, towards the centre of the city, a few fires still flickered like old rags in a wind and ash covered everything. Elric felt it clinging to his flesh. He felt it clogging his nostrils and drifting through his clothing – the ash of his distant ancestors, whose blackened corpses filled the houses in mimicry of life's activities, threatening to engulf him. But he walked on, fascinated by this glimpse into his past, at the very turning point in his race's destiny. He found himself wandering through rooms still occupied by the husks of their inhabitants, their pets, their playthings, their tools, through squares where fountains had once plashed, through temples and public buildings where his folk had met to debate and decide the issues of the day, before the Emperors had taken all power to themselves and Melniboné had grown to depend upon her slaves, hidden away so that they should not make Imrryr ugly with their presence. He paused in a workshop, some shoe-seller's stall. He grieved for these dead, gone more than ten thousand years since.

**T**he ruins touched something that was tender in him, and he found that he possessed a fresh longing, a longing for a past before Melniboné, out of fear, bargained for that power which conquered the world.

The turrets and gables, the blackened thatch and torn beams, the piles of broken stone and brick, the animal troughs and ordinary domestic implements abandoned outside the houses, filled him with a melancholy he found almost sweet and he paused to inspect a cradle or a spinning wheel which showed an aspect of a proud Melnibonéan folk he had never known, but which he felt he understood.

There were tears in his eyes as he roamed those streets, desperately hoping to find just one living soul apart from himself, but he knew the city had stood unpopulated for at least a hundred years after her destruction.

"Oh, that I had destroyed Imrryr so that I might restore H'hui'shan!" He stood in a square of broken



statues and fallen masonry looking up at the enormous moon which now rose directly above his head, sending his shadow to mingle with those of the ruins; and he dragged off his helmet and shook out his long, milk-white hair and turned yearning hands towards the city as if to beg forgiveness, and then he sat down upon a dusty slab carved with the delicacy and imagination of genius and over which blood had flowed, then baked, a coarse glaze; and he buried his crimson eyes in the sleeve of his ashy shirt and his shoulder shook and he groaned his complaint at whatever Fate had led him to this ordeal...

**T**here came a voice from behind him that seemed to echo from distant catacombs, across aeons of time, as resonant as the Dragon Falls where one of Elric's ancestors had died (in combat, it was said, with himself) and as commanding as the whole of Elric's long and binding royal history. It was a voice he recognized and had hoped, in so many ways, never to hear again.

Once more he wondered if he were mad. The voice was unmistakably that of his dead father, Sadric the Eighty-Sixth, whose company in life he had so rarely shared.

"Ah, Elric, thou weeps, I see. Thou art thy mother's son and for that I love thee as I love her memory, though thou killst the only woman I shall ever truly love and for that I hate thee with an unjust hatred."

"Father?" Elric lowered his arm and turned his bone-white face behind him to where, leaning against a ruined pillar, stood the slender, frail presence of Sadric. Upon his lips was a smile that was terrible in its tranquility.

Elric looked disbelievingly at the face which was exactly as it had been when he had last seen it as his father had lain in funeral state.

"For an unjust hatred there is no release, save the peace of death. And here, as you'll observe, I am denied the peace of death."

"I have dreamed of you father and your disappointment with me. I would that I could have been all you desired in a son..."

"There was never a second, Elric, when you could have been that. The act of thy creation was the sealing of her doom. We had been warned of it in every omen but could do nothing to avert that hideous destiny—" and his eyes glared with a hatred only the unrested dead could know.

"How came you here, father? I had thought you chosen by Chaos, gone to the service of our patron Duke, Lord Arioch."

"Arioch could not claim me because of another pact I had made, with Count Mashabak. He is no longer my patron." And a kind of laugh escaped him.

"Your soul was claimed by Mashabak of Chaos?"

"But disputed by Arioch. My soul is hostage to their rivalries—or was. By some sorcery I still command, I betook myself here, to the very beginning of our true history. And here I have some short sanctuary."

"You are hiding, father, from the Lords of Chaos?"

"I have gained some time while they dispute, for I have here a spell, my last great spell, which will free me to join your mother in the Forest of Souls where she awaits me."

"You have a passport to the Forest of Souls? I'd thought such things a myth." Elric wiped chilly sweat from his forehead.

"I sent thy mother there to remain until I joined her. I gave her the means, our Scroll of Dead-Speaking, and she is safe in that sweet eternity, which many souls seek and which few find. I swore an oath that I would do all I could to be reunited with her."

The shade stepped forward, as if entranced, and reached to touch Elric's face with something like affection. But when the hand fell away there was only torment in the old man's undead eyes.

Elric knew a certain sympathy. "Have you no companions here, father?"

"Only thee, my son. Thou and I now haunt these ruins together."

An unwholesome frisson: "Am I, too, a prisoner here?" said the albino.

"At my humour, aye, my son. Now that I have touched thee we are bound together, whether thou leavest this place or no, for it is the fate of such as I to be linked always to the first living mortal his hand shall fall upon. We are one, now, Elric—or shall be."

And Elric shuddered at the hatred and the relish in his father's otherwise desolate voice.

"Can I not release you, father? I have been to R'lin K'ren A'a, where our race began in this realm. I sought our past there. I could speak of it..."

"Our past is in our blood. It travels with us. Those degenerates of R'lin K'ren A'a, they were never our true kin. They bred with humans and vanished. It was not they who founded or preserved great Melniboné..."





"There are so many stories, father. So many conflicting legends..." Elric was eager to continue the conversation with his father. Few such opportunities had existed while Sadric lived.

"The dead know truth from lies. They are privy to that understanding, at least. And I know the truth of it. We did not stem from R'lin K'ren A'a. Such questions and speculations are unnecessary. We are assured of our origins. Thou wouldst be a fool, my son, to question our histories, to dispute their truth. I had thee taught this."

Elric kept his own counsel.

"My magic called the jill-dragon from her cave. The one I had the strength to summon. But she came and I sent her to thee. This is the only sorcery I have left. It is the first significant sorcery of our race and the purest, the dragon-sorcery. But I could not instruct her. I sent her to thee knowing she would recognize thee or she would kill thee. Both actions would have brought us together, eventually, no doubt." The shade permitted itself a crooked smile.

"You cared no more than that, father?"

"I could do no more than that. I long for thy mother. We were meant to be united forever. Thou must help me reach her, Elric, and help me swiftly for my own energies and spells weaken — soon Arioch or Mashabak shall claim me. Or destroy me entirely in their struggle!"

"You have no further means of escaping them?"

Elric felt his left leg shake uncontrollably for a few seconds before he forced it to obey his will. He realized it had been too long since he had last taken the infusion of herbs and drugs which allowed him the energy of a normal creature.

"In a way. If I remain attached to thee, my son, the object of my unjust hate, then my soul could hide with thine occupying thy flesh and mine, disguised by blood that is my blood. They would never sniff me out!"

Again Elric was seized by a sensation of profound cold, as if death already claimed him; his head was a maelstrom of ungoverned emotions as he sought desperately to take a grip on himself, praying that with the sun's rising his father's ghost would vanish.

"The sun will not rise here, Elric. Not here. Not until the moment of our release or our destruction. That is why we are here."

"But does Arioch not object to this? He is my patron,

still!" Elric looked for a new madness in his father's face but could find none.

"He is otherwise engaged and could not come to thee now whether to aid or to punish. His dispute with Count Mashabak absorbs him. That is why thou canst serve me, to perform the task I did not know to perform when alive. Wouldst thou do this thing for me, my son? For a father who always hated thee but did his duty by thee?"

"If I performed this task for you, father, would I be free of you?"

His father lowered his head in assent.

Elric put a trembling hand upon the pommel of his sword and flung back his head so that the long white hair filled the air like a halo in the moonlight and his uneasy eyes rose to stare into the face of the dead king.

He let out a sigh. In spite of all his horrors, there was some part of him which would be fulfilled if he achieved his father's desire. He wished, however, that he had been permitted the choice. But it was not the Melnibonéan way to permit choice. Even relatives had to be bonded by more than blood.

"Explain my task, father."

"Thou must find my soul, Elric."

"Your soul —?"

"My soul is not with me." The shade itself seemed to make an effort to remain standing. "What animates me now is my will and old sorcery. My soul was hidden so that it might rejoin thy mother, but in avoiding Mashabak's and Arioch's wrath, I lost that which contained it. Find it for me, Elric."

"How shall I recognize it?"

"It resides in a box. No ordinary box, but a box of black rosewood carved all with roses and smelling always of roses. It was your mother's."

"How came you to lose such a valuable box, father?"

"When Marabak appeared to claim my soul, then Arioch, I drew up a false soul, which is the spell I taught thee in *Incantations After Death*, to deceive them. This quasi-soul became the object of their feuding for a while and my true soul fled to safety in the box which Diavon Slar, my old body-servant, was to keep safely for me on strictest instructions of secrecy."

"He maintained your secrecy, father."

"Aye — and fled, believing he had a treasure, believing he could control me through his possession of that box! He fled to Pan Tang with what he understood to be my trapped spirit — some children's tale he had heard — and was disappointed to find no spirit obeyed him at his command. So he planned, instead, to sell

his booty to the Theocrat. As it happened, he never reached Pan Tang but was seized by sea-raiders from the Purple Towns. They included the box in their casual booty. My soul was truly lost." And with this came a flicker of a former irony, the faintest of smiles.

"The pirates?"

"Of them, I know only what Diavon Slar told me as I was extracting the vengeance I had warned him I would take. The raiders probably returned to Menii, where they auctioned their booty. My soulbox left our world entirely." Sadric moved suddenly and it was as if an insubstantial shadow shifted in the moonlight. "I can still sense it. I know it travelled between the worlds and went where now only the jill-dragon can follow. That is what has thwarted me. For, until I called thee, I had no means of pursuit. I am bound to this place and now to thee. Thou must fetch back my soulbox, Elric, so that I can rejoin thy mother and rid myself of unjust hate. As thou wilt rid thyself of me."

**T**rembling with conflicting passions, Elric spoke at last:

"Father, I believe this to be an impossible quest. I cannot but suspect you send me upon it out of hatred alone."

"Hatred, aye, but more besides. I must rejoin your mother, Elric! I must. I must."

Knowing his father's abiding obsession, that convinced Elric of the ghost's veracity.

"Do not fail me, my son."

"And should I succeed? What will happen to us, father?"

"Bring back my soul and we are both released."

"But if I fail?"

"My soul will leave its prison and enter thee. We shall be united until thy death - I, with my unjust hatred, bonded to the object of my hatred, and thee burdened by all thou most hates in proud Melniboné." He paused, almost to savour this. "That would be my consolation."

"Not mine."

Sadric nodded his corpse's head in silent understanding and a soft, unlikely laugh escaped his throat. "Indeed!"

"And dost thou have other aid for me in this, father? Some spell or charm?"

"Only what thou comest by on the way, my son. Bring back the rosewood box and we both can go our own ways. Fail, and our destinies and souls are linked forever! Thou wilt never be free of me, thy past, or Melniboné! But thou wilt bring the old glories back, eh?"

Elric drug-enlivened body began to tremble. The fight and this encounter had exhausted him, and there were no souls here on which his sword could feed.

"I am ailing, father, and must soon return. The drugs that sustain me were lost with my pack animals."

Sadric shrugged. "As for that, thou hast merely to discover a source of souls on which thy blade might feed. There's killing a-plenty ahead. And a little more that I perceive, but yet it does not come clear..." He frowned. "Go..."

Elric hesitated. Some ordinary impulse wanted him to tell his father that he no longer killed casually to further any whim. Like all Melnibonéans, Sadric had thought nothing of killing the human folk of their

Empire. To Sadric, the runesword was merely a useful tool, as a stick might be to a cripple. Supernatural schemer though his father was, player of complex games against the Gods, he still unquestioningly assumed that one must pledge loyalty to one demon or another in order to survive.

Elric's vision, of universally held power, a place like Tanelorn, owing allegiance neither to Law nor to Chaos but only to itself, was anathema to his father who had made a religion and a philosophy of compromise, as had all his royal race for millennia, so that compromise itself was now raised over all other virtues and become the backbone of their beliefs. Elric wanted, again, to tell his father that there were other ideas, other ways to live, which involved neither excessive violence, nor cruelty, nor sorcery, nor conquest, that he had learned of these ideas not merely from the Young Kingdoms but also from his own folk's histories.

Yet he knew that it would be useless. Sadric was even now devoting all his considerable powers to restoring the past. He knew no other way of life or, indeed, of death.

The albino prince turned away, and it seemed to him at that moment that he had never experienced such grief, even when Cymoril had died on the blade of his runesword, even when Imrryr had blazed and he had known he was doomed to a rootless future, a lonely death.

"I shall seek your rosewood box, father. But where can I begin?"

"The jill-dragon knows. She'll carry thee to the realm where the box was taken. Beyond that I cannot predict. Prediction grows difficult. All my powers weaken. Mayhap thou must kill to achieve the box. Kill many times." The voice was faint now, dry branches in the wind, "or worse."

Elric found that he staggered. He was weakening by the moment. "Father, I have no strength."

"The dragon venom..." But his father was gone, leaving only a sense of his ghostly passing.

Elric forced himself to move. Now every fallen wall seemed an impossible obstacle. He picked his way slowly through the ruins, back over rubble and broken walls, over the little streams and coarse turf terraces of the hills, forcing himself with a will summoned from habit alone, to climb the final hill where, outlined against the huge, sinking moon, Scarsnout awaited him, her wings folded, her long muzzle raised as her tongue tasted the wind.

He remembered his father's last words. They in turn made him recollect an old Herbal which had spoken of the distillation of dragon-venom; how it brought courage to the weak and skill to the strong, how a man might fight for five days and nights and feel no pain. And he remembered how the Herbal had said to collect the venom, so before he clambered back upon the dragon he had reached up his helm and caught in the hissing steel a small drop of venom which would cool and harden, he knew, into a pastel, a crumb or two of which might be taken cautiously with considerable liquid.

**B**ut now he must endure his pain and fight against his weakness as the dragon bears him up into the unwelcoming blackness which lies

above the moon; and a single long, slow stroke of silver gashes the dark and a single sharp clap of thunder breaks the terrible silence of the sky, and the jill-dragon raises her head and beats her monstrous wings and roars a sudden challenge to those unlikely elements...

... While Elric howls the old wild songs of the Dragon Lords, and plunges, in sensuous symbiosis with the great reptile, out of the night and into the blinding glory of a summer afternoon.

**A**s if aware of her rider's growing weakness, the dragon flew with long, deliberate strokes of her wings and banked with careful grace through the blue pallor of the sky until they flew over trees so close together and with foliage so dense that it seemed at first they crossed dark green clouds until the old forest gave way to grassy hills and fields through which a broad river ran, and again the gentle landscape had a familiarity to it, though this time Elric did not dread it.

Soon a sprawling city lay ahead, built on both banks and making the sky hazy with its smoke. Of stone and brick and wood, of slate and thatch and timber shingles, of a thousand blended stinks and noises, it was full of statues and markets and monuments over which the jill-dragon began slowly to circle while below, in panic and curiosity, the citizens ran to look or dashed for cover, depending upon their natures—but then Scarsnout had flapped her wings and taken them with stately authority back into the upper sky, as if she had investigated the place and found it unsuitable.

The summer day went on. More than once did the great dragon—she seem about to land—on scrubland, village, marsh, lake or elm-glade—but always Scarsnout rejected the place and flew on dissatisfied.

Though he had taken the precaution of tying himself by his long silk scarf to the dragon's spine-horn, Elric was losing strength with every moment. Now, moreover, he had no reason to welcome death. To be reunited with his father through eternity was perhaps the worst of all possible hells. It was only when the dragon flew through rainclouds that Elric was able to capture a little water in his helmet and crumble into it the merest flake of dried venom, drinking the foul-tasting result off in a single draught, that he knew any hope. But when the liquid filled his every vein with fire whose stink made him loathe the flesh that harboured it and want to tear at offending arteries, muscles, skin, he wondered if he had not merely chosen an especially painful way of ensuring his eternal union with Sadric. With each nerve alight, he yearned for any death, any release from the agony.

But even as the pain filled him, the strength grew until soon it was possible to call on that strength and gradually abolish or ignore the pain until it was gone and he felt a cleaner, sweeter energy fill him, somehow purer than that he received from his runesword.

As the jill-dragon flew through evening skies, Elric felt himself grow whole again. A peculiar euphoria filled him. He sang out the ancient dragon-songs, the rich, silky, wicked songs of his folk who, for all their cruelty, had relished every experience that came their way and this relish for life and sensation came naturally to the albino, despite the weakness of his blood.

Indeed, it seemed to him that his blood was somehow touched by a compensatory quality, a world of almost unrelieved sensuality and vividness, so intense that they sometimes threatened to destroy not only him, but those around him. It was one of the reasons he was prepared to accept his loneliness.

Now it did not matter how far the jill-dragon flew. Her venom sustained him. The symbiosis was near-complete. On without rest beat Scarsnout until, beneath a golden late afternoon sun which made the three-quarters ripened wheat glow and shimmer like burnished copper, where a startled figure in a pointed alabaster cap cried out in delight at the sight of them and a cloud of starlings rose suddenly to trace with their hurried flight some familiar hieroglyph in the delicate blue wash of the sky and leave a sudden silence behind them, Scarsnout extended her great ribbed wings in a sinuously elegant glide towards what seemed at first a road made of basalt or some other rock and then became a mile-wide long-healed scar through the wheatlands, too smooth, unpopulated and vast to be a road, yet with an unguessable purpose. It cut through the crops as if it had been laid that day, heaped on both sides by great unkempt banks on which a few weeds and wildflowers grew and over which hopped, flapped and crawled every kind of carrion vermin.

As they dropped lower Elric could smell the vile stuff and almost gagged. His nose confirmed what he saw—piles of refuse, bones, human waste, bits of broken furniture and ruined pots—great continuous banks of detritus stretching on either side of the smoothly polished road from horizon to horizon, with no notion of where or from where it led... Elric sang to his jill to take him up and away from all this filth and into the sweet air of the high summer skies, but she ignored him, wheeling first to the North, then to the South, until she was swooping down the very middle of that great, smooth scar, which had something of the brownish-pink of sunned flesh, and she had landed almost without any sensation in the centre of it.

**N**ow Scarsnout folded back her wings and settled her clawed feet upon the ground, clearly indicating that she intended to carry Elric no further. With some reluctance he climbed off her back, unravelling the ruined scarf and wrapping it around his waist, as if it would secure him from any dangers hereabouts, and sang the farewell chant of thanking and kinship and, as he called the last lines, the great jill-dragon lifted up her beautiful, reptilian head and joined, with sonorous gravity, in the final cadences. Her voice might have been the voice of Time itself.

Then her jaws snapped shut, her eyes turned once upon him, half-lidded, almost in affection, and, once her tongue had tasted the evening air, she had widened her wings, hopped twice, shaking the surface so that Elric thought it must crack, and was at last a-sky, mounting into the atmosphere again, her graceful body curling and twisting as her wings carried her up to the eastern horizon, the setting sun casting her long, terrible shadow across the fields, and then, near the horizon, a single flash of silver suggested to Elric that his jill-dragon had returned to her own dimension. He raised his helm in farewell, as grateful for her

venom as her patience.

All Elric wished to do was to get free of this unnatural causeway. Though it gleamed like polished marble, he could see now that it was nothing more than beaten mud; earth piled on earth until it had almost the consistency of solid rock. Perhaps the whole thing was built of garbage? For some reason, this thought disturbed him and he began to walk rapidly towards the southern edge. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he wondered again what purpose the place had. Flies now surrounded him and buzzards regarded him as a possible contender for their sweetmeats. He coughed again at the stink but knew he must climb the stuff to get to the wholesome air of the wheatfields.

"Safe passage to your home-cave, sweet Lady Scarsnout," he murmured as he moved. "I owe you both life and death, it seems. But I bear you no ill will."

His scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth, the albino began to climb the yielding filth, disturbing bones and vermin with every movement and making slow progress, while around him birds and winged rats hissed and chittered at him. Again he wondered what kind of creature could have created such a path, if path it were. It could not, he felt sure, be the work of any human agency and this made him all the more anxious to return to the known qualities of the wheatfield.

He had reached the rim and was clambering along it to find a firmer foothold down. Scattering rotted matter and angry rodents as he went, he wondered what kind of culture brought its waste to line a track created by some supernatural being. Then he thought he saw something larger shift below, near where the wheat grew, but the light was bad and he put it down to his imagination. Was the refuse some kind of holy offering? Did this realm's people worship a God who patrolled from one habitation to another in the form of a gigantic snake?

**T**here was another movement below him, as he slid down a few feet and came to rest on an old cistern, and he saw a soft felt hat rise above a pile of rags and an avian face stare up at him in astonished amusement. "Good heavens, sir. This cannot be coincidence! But what purpose has Fate for pairing we two, do you think?" It was Wheldrake, stumbling up from the wheatfield. "What lies behind you, sir, that's duller than this? More corn? Why, sir, this seems a world of corn!"

"Of corn and garbage and a somewhat idiosyncratic pathway of baffling purpose which slices through all, from East to West. It has a sinister air to it."

"So you go the other way, sir?"

"To avoid whichever unpleasant creation of Chaos has chosen to slither this route and take its choice of these offerings. My horses, I suppose, were not carried through the dimensions with you?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. I'd guessed you eaten, by now. But the reptile was one of those with a sentimental weakness for heroes, I take it."

"Something of the sort." Elric smiled, grateful in an odd way for the red-headed poet's ironies. They were preferable to his most recent conversation with his father. As he slid down some powdery and decomposing substance alive with maggots, he embraced





the little man who almost chirped with pleasure at their reunion. "My dear sir!"

Whereupon, arm in arm they went, back to the bottom and the sweetening wheat, back in the direction of a river Elric had seen from his dragon steed. There had been a town upon that river which, he guessed, might be reached in less than a day. He spoke of this to Wheldrake, adding that they were sadly short of provisions or the means of obtaining any, unless they chewed the unripe wheat.

"I regret my poaching days in Northumberland are long behind me, sir. But as a lad I was apt enough with snare and a gun. It might be, since your scarf is rather badly the worse for wear, that you would not mind if I unravelled it a little more. It's just possible I might remember my old skills."

With an amiable shrug, Elric handed the bird-like poet his scarf and watched as the little fingers worked swiftly, unravelling and reknitting until he had a length of thin cord. "With evening drawing close, sir, I'd best get to work at once."

By now they were some distance from the wall of garbage and could smell only the rich, restful scents of the summer fields. Elric took his ease amongst the wheatstalks while Wheldrake went to work and within a short space of time, having cleared a wide area and dug a pit, they were able to enjoy a young rabbit while they speculated at such a strange world which grew such vast fields and yet seemed to have so few farmsteads or villages. Staring at the rabbit's carcass turning on a spit (also of Wheldrake's devising) Elric said that, for all his sorcerous education, he was not the familiar traveller through the realms that Wheldrake seemed to be.

"Not by choice, sir, I assure you. I blame a certain Doctor Dee, whom I consulted on the Greeks. It was to do with metre, sir. A metric question. I needed, I thought, to hear the language of Plato. Well, the story's long and not especially novel to those of us who travel, willy nilly, through the multiverse, but I spent some while on one particular plane, shifting a little, I must admit, through time (but not the other dimensions) until I had come to rest, I was sure, in Putney."

"Would you return there, Master Wheldrake?"

"Indeed I would, sir. I'm growing a little long-in-the-tooth for extra-dimensional adventuring, and I tend to form firm attachments, so it is rather hard on me, you know, to miss so many friends."

"Well, sir. I hope you will find them again."

"And you, sir! Good luck with whatever it is you hope to discover. Though I suspect you are the kind who's forever searching for the numinous."

"Perhaps," said Elric soberly, chewing upon a tender leg, "but I think the numinosity of what I presently seek would surprise you greatly..."



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**Michael Moorcock** first appeared in *Interzone* with our premier issue in March 1982. Since then, he has written such books as *The Laughter of Carthage* (1984), *The City in the Autumn Stars* (1986), *The Dragon in the Sword* (1986), *Mother London* (1988) and *Casablanca* (1989). One of his latest projects is to collaborate with anthologist and writer David Garnett on a revival of the fondly remembered *New Worlds* magazine, which will be appearing as a twice-yearly anthology in paperback book form (Gollancz). We're very pleased to welcome him back to these pages after such a long absence. The above piece is a segment extracted from his new Elric novel, *The Revenge of the Rose*, due to be published in full by Grafton Books on 9th May 1991.



## Interaction

Continued from page 5

college I've heard fulminations against the evils of technology by people who play their hi-fi too loud at night, listened to uninformed drivel about cosmology and the nature of reality, and I was once asked by a student if I could see to her personal stereo as it had inexplicably stopped working – it turned out the batteries were flat.

The whole tone of Mr Keith's letter is one of "I don't want to know." If an sf reader is not challenged by a story with science in it, it means either the story is badly written or else the reader is not as intelligent as s/he thought. Get the science out of sf, and whimsy will have triumphed without a Tolkien rip-off in sight – who needs elves and goblins when you've got emotive politics and artistic posturing? I actually find New Scientist quite hard going, but I'd rather be a nerd reading that than a nerd reading (and proclaiming as Gospel) Spare Rib or Living Marxism.

**Paul G. Beardsley**  
Havant, Hants.

Dear Editors:

The cover painting for IZ 43 is one of the most perfect I have ever seen. A work of genius!

It would be very interesting to know if it was inspired by Harry Harrison's coal-fired robots, or if it was an independent inspiration.

**Bob Shaw**  
Warrington

**Editor:** We suspect it was on independent inspiration. Oscar Chichoni is an Argentinian artist who now lives in Italy. It is quite possible that he has at some stage been commissioned to illustrate translations of Herry Horri-son's books, but we're not aware that that's the case.

Dear Editors:

This may put me in a minority, but I think most of your artwork is excellent. Iain Byers is one bloody brilliant artist. Use Mike Hadley more sparingly – his artwork is best suited to strip illustrations, and outside of them his work can be seriously out of place. As for single-artist issues, keep doing them, but only a couple of times a year. The Ian Miller issue was quite good, the lan Sander-son issue superb (use him more often), and the Judith Clute issue a little less impressive.

Non-fiction: outstanding. Bruce Sterling's comment column is interesting, and his Workshop Lexicon was marvellous stuff. You couldn't get him to try to define definitively(?) exactly what Cyberpunk is for me, could you? I've never really been able to work that one out myself.

Nick Lowe is clearly miles outside his tree. It still isn't any easier to get any critical value out of his film reviews. What self-respecting sf film reviewer would admit to not having seen the original Steve(n) McQueen version of The Blob, or any Nightmare on Elm Street? These are necessary qualifications – has he achieved them yet? Still his reviews are nicely entertaining: don't get rid of him. And odds on he gives the next John Carpenter horror film a positive write-up.

I like Wendy Bradley's TV reviews. They're out-of-date by the time they see print, but they're quite good nonetheless. Difficult to believe that Ms Bradley hasn't reviewed The Twilight Zone (third incarnation) yet, or any of the zillion trashy US sf/fantasy/horror series (The Hitchhiker, Friday the 13th, etc.). And how about some sort of article(s) about old television programmes, from Dr Who and Star Trek to Blake's Seven and Solvage 1. Yes, most of these shows were utter shite, but the history of television sf is not unimportant. Oh, and what happened to Stephen Gallagher's Chimerio (did I miss it)? or to the supposedly reincarnated V? Anybody know?

Suggestions...David Redd had a good idea when he suggested you should do a series of articles on how to write sf. After all, Brian Stableford's one-off article on the subject topped last year's non-fiction poll, I seem to remember. And STOP DROPPING READERS' LETTERS (Interaction). It's massively popular and great entertainment. (If space gets tight, you could always use the reduced typeface you use when printing the comments from the annual poll, which are usually hilarious.)

As far as special issues are concerned, my suggestion would be for you to be very careful. Personally, I can't stand Brian Aldiss's work. My loss, I suspect. But I and all others like myself don't like having half of the magazine we've just bought dedicated to something we don't care for. The All-New Star and All-Female issues were slightly different, since both still provided a large variety of material. In fact, the All-New Star issue was the best issue of Interzone I've read. How about one of them a year?

That reciprocated interview between Lisa Goldstein and Pat Murphy in IZ 42 got me thinking. Wouldn't it have been more fun to have had them interviewing each other simultaneously? Why limit this to just interviews? Why not have two sf-type persons with opposing views debating some topic of interest? Lock 'em in a room for however long it takes with some coffee and biscuits, and let 'em talk/argue/discuss/hit each other about the head with various vaguely surprising weapons. When they're quite finished, publish

the transcript. Possible pairs of debaters: Charles Platt v Games Workshop, Whitley Strieber v Thomas M. Disch, any Scientologist v anyone with half a brain (or more), Charles Platt v the World, &c. &c.

**Mike Jones**  
Oxford

**Editor:** Unfortunately Charles Platt will not be resuming his comment columns for IZ (although his health is improving, I'm glad to report). The gap is being filled by Simon Ings.

Dear Editors:

In case you're interested in the background details of your readership – I'm female, 43 years old, a librarian, with a long-standing partner of the opposite sex and no kids. I've been reading Interzone since issue number one. I'm pleased the magazine has gone monthly, even if it causes me problems sometimes fitting it into an already heavy reading schedule.

As for suggestions, I would welcome a few more single-author issues and a series on notables who are perhaps not quite household names, especially to newer, younger readers. For example – Cordwainer Smith, James Blish, R.A. Lafferty, Barry Malzberg, Edgar Pangborn, Joanna Russ, William Tenn.

Also a series on sf from countries other than the UK or USA. In his introduction to The Ultimate Guide to SF, David Pringle admits to not being competent in this area but I'm sure there are many around who are. If you can haul Maxim Jakubowski away from selling crime novels in the Charing Cross Road, he could no doubt contribute an item or two. Likewise Brian Aldiss or John Brunner.

Or what about "ONE (or two) HIT WONDERS"? Writers who made some impression then – NOTHING! Such as Arsen Darnay, Vonda McIntyre, John Calvin Batchelor, Felix Gotschalk, Mark Adlard, Lee Killough. A "What are they doing now?" type of series maybe.

I'm not saying I like the work of all these people, only that they sort of fit into these categories in my mind's eye. Good luck with whatever avenues you decide to take for future issues.

**Esther Thomson**  
London

**Editor:** Now that our sister magazine MILLION is up and running, we're thinking of discontinuing our "Big Sellers" series of essays (although probably not until after we have run John Clute's promised piece on Orson Scott Card). We may well replace that series with another, along one of the lines you suggest. Meanwhile, all "Big Sellers" fans are urged to read MILLION!

# The Captain Habit

## John Clute

The typewriter in this place eats fingers. Then it prints out an organ-grinder's manicées of Anarch garble, a spastic ague of typos. Then it defaults to sullen silence, except for a broken hum. Here we are in America with a turkey typewriter. Here we are in Southern Florida with an Electronic I-Text memory gobbler from Sears, in the slippery heartland (or retirement park) of the American Dream, where it is thinnest. It is this thinness of the Dream in Florida which so devastates the senses, starving the gates of perception until you begin to invest a typewriter with all the animus of a broken heart; and which makes the place seem so profoundly experimental.

The place is a window. You look through, and there, below the meniscus of the Dream, below the frayed and scummy epidermis of malls and condos, there you can see the faces of the dead, too close for comfort, not yet rotted into compost. They died yesterday for the sake of our pool. The heart of the Florida experiment is not the discovery that the Dream is false – that dream which might in 1991 still be defined as a profound nostalgia for entitlement without cost – the heart of the Florida experiment is the discovery that history is too close. From the realm of the disappeared, their faces press upwards against the plastic loam, thousands upon thousands of them. And the lawns of Florida tremble like a tautened scrim, and the irrigation ditches weep salt tears, and those who are alive in Florida today – many of them retired men and women of enormous affluence who got rich in 1950 by mortgaging us – seem to spend at least part of every day complaining about premonitory lesions in the rupturing flood of material “plenty,” just as though they expected to be alive and still eating 20 years from now when the jaws of history snap, and we become one with the Indians and the Blacks who died last century, in this place, thousands upon thousands of them, for us. So perhaps it doesn't much matter, and we should continue to drink the water table down deeper than the graves, for we shall soon join the water. Because everything that has happened in Florida for 200 years has happened according to a kind of plan. Because Florida is a kind of experiment in species impertinence. It is good science-fiction country.

This reviewer first came here in the middle of the 1950s, long before the feasters had begun to gnaw the bones; it was a time to which the novels of John D. MacDonald make implicit reference whenever a rhetoric of betrayed innocence wrinkles the brow of Travis McGee. But even then the texture of the place was laboratory-thin, a patient aetherized upon a table; even then it all felt like an experiment in

establishing the expression on the face of the white man in history.

A few years later, when this reviewer found himself trapped here, without rights of egress northwards into the sheltering snow, it began to feel as though the experiment were about to incorporate him. For this reviewer, who was very young, Florida became – those terrible wide straight roads cutting into the swamp like knives into a womb became – a veritable Platonic idea of exile: the exile of the solitary boy, the exile of the race. And whatever might happen here as the century continued would only harshen the template. This was, of course, confirmed. Florida is pure sf. In 1960 or so this reviewer had been en route through the state to do a stint of work as seaman on a smallish island-hopping general cargo freighter. He climbed off the land and into the diesel oil and sweat and cheap paint of the ship, and had another experience whose sf nature has only come clearer with the passing of the years. He caught his first sight of a Captain.

He did not, of course, actually meet the Captain of the ship. Ship Captains meet crew members in the same way that Governors of Florida meet Seminoles. Captains and Governors are, after all, sovereigns; domain-mages; autonomy-hoarders. A ship Captain does not see people. He sees functions, he sees parts, he sees crew, he sees the organism of journey which the parts grease, he sees the shape of the story. For a member of the crew, a Captain is a veritable Platonic idea of exile. Between Florida and a ship the main difference is that, on a ship, the Seminoles do not have to die to make oil. The Captain is sf incarnate, a mage of journey. For any journey is a telling. It is no surprise at all that A. Bertram Chandler, who captained ships for many years in both hemispheres, should have written a great deal of sf. It was, after all, just captaining with a pen. What is perhaps less to be expected, at first glance, is that so much of it was bad.

At second glance, the problem dissolves. It all comes down to purity. The relationship of a Captain to his ship is altogether too pure for life, or story. No genuinely good sf novel can ever do more than approximate the

purity of the idea, the autoclave of an ideal journey, the perfect transparency of a mise en scene crewed by parts, the effortless dominance of a protagonist-mage. In his later work – in the only marginally less than innumerable galactic-rim space operas starring Captain or Commodore Grimes – A. Bertram Chandler showed more and more the creative costs of the habit of captaining. After totalitarianism, the highest of these costs is laziness. Captains, like Arthur under the hill, are lazy beasts. Most of them, like Chandler himself, are insufficiently self-absorbed to become solipsistic; and they typically deal with the problem of aura-maintenance – after all, a Captain is legally a kind of godling – by an assumption of curmudgeonly abruptness and reserve. Translated into words on paper, this laziness shows up in a tendency to represent the inner life of protagonists through sets of rudimentary codes, and to employ dictions of telling which one might kindly call grumpy: Chandler's own latter-day awkwardness as a story teller has precisely the tone of a Captain declining to be polite to a harbourmaster. All of this comes across with exemplary clarity in the pages of *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Dreamstone, Canberra: unpriced limited edition), a very substantial posthumous collection (Chandler died in 1984) put together by Keith Curtis and Susan Chandler.

The best story in the book is the last one printed, though the first chronologically, “Giant Killer,” which was first published in *Astounding* in 1945. Chandler was about 30 when he wrote this extremely effective parody or analogue of the generation starship perceptual breakthrough tale, in which desperately warring clans of mutated rats, under the ultimate command of a charismatic leader, fatally take control over their weird and graphically enclosed environment, which they discover to be a space freighter hurtling into the nearest sun. Chandler had not yet himself become a Captain; and “Giant Killer” is told from several viewpoints, including that of the diseased protagonist, whose power lust Chandler subjects to the kind of narrative scrutiny it requires (but he never afterwards created a Captain whose diktats suffered anything like similar scrutiny). It is a rounded

forwardly propulsive tale out of the Golden Age – and it embodies one paradigm of sf turn – the slow discovery of the true nature of the universe – that Chandler would also afterwards avoid. He did so, one suspects, for obvious reasons. For the remaining 40 prolific years of his writing career, he tended to deal, for obvious reasons, with the surmounting of challenges rather than the confronting of transformative epiphany. He did so because he became a Captain. Because epiphany is no respecter of rank.

The worst story in the book, and the most lazy, is the first printed, though it is one of the later ones to reach publication. "Sea Change," from 1970, lachadically transplants an Australian sea Captain 30 or so years into the vuture, via cryogenic doubletalk, so that he can be cured of a disease, and start his career again. The new Australia is characterized, in full, by the bared breasts of a woman in an office. The psychology of the Captain's wife – she too has slept for 30 years, just to stick by hubby – is left completely unexplored. The crisis of the tale – a disabling storm allows the Captain to show a wondering new generation how to sail a steamer – is nicely recounted, as anecdotes can be. But the story as a whole exhibits a toothless paucity of invention that makes one think, irresistibly, of captive audiences. (The reviewer heard many stories from his own Captain, as though he were a painted ear upon a painted ocean.)

Nothing in the rest of the book reaches the pulp heights – which are genuine – of "Giant Killer," and none slope off so blatantly into the droning anecdote of "Sea Change." The sequence of tales is carefully monitored, moves slowly from the seas of Earth to the synonyms of space. Grimes makes several appearances, some of them uncrafftily yanked from continuing sagas, but one – "The Kinsolving's Planet Irregulars" – coming as close to a self-perspective as Chandler was inclined to allow; in this tale, Grimes falls through a baffle of relativity states into the world of an Earthly sea Captain, and they exchange telling Olympian glances, god to god. Most of the intervening stories of space exploration are appallingly primitive in their technology and almost completely lacking in any real intuitive grasp of what actually might come about, in the late 30th century, in our solar system. Chandler was happiest – and we are generally happy going along with him – in the never-never land of the Rim, Captaining.

The folk who inhabit the various categories of starship which feature in the shadow-haunted space-opera universe of Paul J. McAuley are something else indeed. A few of them

are captains of sorts, but McAuley has no sympathy whatsoever for born commanders – a human propensity which almost (I've argued previously) disqualifies him as a writer of full-blown brawny space opera – and the various protagonists of the stories collected in **The King of the Hill and Other Stories** (Gollancz, £13.95) are almost always members of the crew, or marginally overripe solipsists in singleships. Moreover, he retains a capacity to treat space opera turns as expressive of adolescent crises – naked unadulterated crises, that is, of epiphanies (failed or otherwise), deaths (private and convulsive), love (failed), great gangly leaps from frying pans to fire. All of this works more smoothly in short-story form than it did in his first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars* (1988), a tale too adult for its circumstances. The tales first published in *Interzone* – they make up half the book – may be familiar; of them, only "Exiles" falls quite to jell on re-reading, and "Little Ilya and Spider and Box" is a fine, tightly drawn, floridly taut little romance, which could have gone on for chapters more. Of the stories published elsewhere, most of them sharing the same generalized galactic background that also backcloths the full-length books, "The Airs of Earth" fails to say anything original about Cordwainer Smith, but the rest are literate, charged, wryly gloomy after the fashion of Brits in Space, and visibly gather up the reins for the long haul into a big career.

There is nothing incompetent – that is, unintended – about the work of Dean R. Koontz, just as there is nothing unintended – that is, spontaneous – about the long experiment in Florida to set our expression. **Cold Fire** (Headline, £13.95) may be set mostly in California (where Koontz lives), and parts of it may even reflect in anodyne booster terms an Orange County superficially similar to the terrain Kim Stanley Robinson has subjected to something like adult interrogation; but it could be Florida; and Koontz loves it. The Chamber of Commerce lingo in which he describes the lifestyles and habitations of his cast reads like a series of instructions. The book, in other words, through the careful (indeed pedantic) flattery of his diction, is clearly designed to cater to the bullies of middle America (who buy the discount bestsellers in the clone chains) and to muscle the dissidents (those who might feel exiled from the state he describes as normative).

The story itself is damned good in places, though mercilessly long. Jim Ironheart (whose name is apt) has been receiving messages, possibly from God, that impel him to crisscross America in order to save selected individuals from violent deaths; Holly

Thorne (prickly but fructifying) cottons on to Ironheart's publicity-shy campaign, traces him down, falls in love with the piercing-blue-eyed saviour, guides him to a resolution. This resolution neatly (perhaps over-neatly) wraps up the plot, codifies and sanctions the psychopathology of the saviour, sets the extremely rich loving couple on course to save more. Everything is clearly explained more than once. Astonishingly accurate and detailed guesses on the part of Holly Thorne cash out again and again, because in truth *Cold Fire* is loaded dice, a mall in a cornucopia mask, an experiment in making us read.

There is no time to do justice to the genuine cold fire of Ian Watson. **The Flies of Memory** (Collancz, £13.95) is a patter song in the Theatre of Memory, a space opera, a metaphysical concert, a consort of metaphysicians, a vaudeville, a tap-dance, a gas. It is also, one must suppose, about as precariously daft a tale as Watson has ever constructed, in that it makes far more sense in synopsis than it does while one reads the thing. The four main sections of the book are conducted – though not exactly told – by four of the many female leads, or Beatrices of the memory field which substrates the universe we know – the universe which "needs to remember itself, or it falls apart" – the universe which has become myriad to give God something to know in the end, the universe which false Flies of memory guard, steering "the one reality through the flux of possibilities. Call us a maintenance program in the information field."

But before long a false Fly is given the chance to tell the activating Beatrices of the local web what it's on about, we have met the true flies of memory in the first chapter, creatures who collect parts of the universe as hives for remembering, after the awful literalism of insects. We meet lots of protagonists. We do not follow everything. Perhaps we are not meant to. The spin is too great, the dazzle too greasapent, the diction too side-of-the-mouth. (We travel to Mars.) (A nun gets pregnant.) *The Flies of Memory* is a spasm of an utterly gay (old sense) and merciless intellect. Beside the Koontz, it is a tiny mammal. It eats its body weight daily. In the long run, I'd bet on it.

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page 38.**



## Repetitions

### Paul Brazier

**R**epetition is the centrepiece of all great rhetoric, and of most selling techniques. As such, it can be the source of the greatest fascination and of the most abject boredom. Certainly, I was bored with the repetitious reading I was finding for myself – the rows of van Vogt and Heinlein on my bookshelves bear mute witness – when I hit on the idea of reviewing books and letting someone else choose what I read for me. The only real trouble with this is that I like science fiction, whereas there is an awful lot of horror about. And the real trouble with horror is repetition.

Take **Stone** by Joe Donnelly (Barrie & Jenkins, £12.99). I thought I was in for a real treat here. The tastefully muted cover in green and purple with its recondite Celtic device seemed to promise a story a cut above the usual visceral nonsense. No such luck. The opening three pages detail the gruesome demise of an innocent pre-pubescent girl. Opening the book at random now, I find a tender and charming description of a young couple indulging in their first sexual embrace who then get eaten. The story is a fairly tedious narrative of a haunted house and the family which move into it, interspersed with variations on this theme of innocence dying hideously. All of which could be forgiven if it were written well. But this phrase from the final page of the book – “The gable wall just seemed to crumble” – is a fair example of the writer's style. This is a house collapsing. Surely it didn't seem to crumble, but rather it crumbled; and that one word just is used repeatedly in exactly this inept fashion throughout the book. Which finally means the disappointment is down to the publishers for not bothering to sub-edit their authors, a mistake repeatedly committed by editors who presumably believe that people who would read this stuff have no ear for style. So why do they bother with the tasteful packaging?

**N**o, I don't like horror. But I like ghost stories. People like M.R. James and Oliver Onions write in a very different genre from Poe and Lovecraft. So I was looking forward to reading **Post Mortem**, a collection of *New Tales of Ghoulish Horror* edited by Paul F. Olson and David B. Silva (Corgi, £3.99). More disappointment, I'm afraid. I should have been warned by the mention of the word “horror” in the subtitle. The introduction starts off promisingly enough, in the form of an Associated Press wire item about a phantom book called *Post Mortem* which, although a best seller, doesn't

seem to exist. But the editorial ineptitude which characterizes the choice of stories is immediately evident: the tone wanders, sacrificing the snappiness of real AP prose in order to indulge their little conceit about this book. It's a nice idea, but sloppily executed, which I am afraid is also true of other stories in the book. While some stories are worthwhile – there is a gem from Ramsey Campbell in homage to M.R. James – others are beneath the standard of stories I have rejected for *Interzone*. The only good thing overall is the lack of the visceral which I have otherwise come to expect from modern horror stories.

A much-used horror cliché is the Vampire story. This has been yoked so firmly to repressed Victorian sexuality by Bram Stoker that I am always surprised when anyone else tries this subgenre; so I did not relish the thought of Ellen Datlow's anthology, **Blood Is Not Enough** (Grafton, £4.50) – although the title did promise some new thinking. Unlike *Post Mortem*, however, I was in for a very pleasant surprise. I have to be honest and say that there isn't a bad item in this book, including the two poems. Honesty is called for because I didn't like the first story at all. It is the original short *Carion Comfort* which Dan Simmons expanded into the 600 page novel I intend never to read, and it is written in his wonderful style. It is the subject matter which I can't take – far too visceral and cold-hearted for me. Every other story uses the theme of vampirism rather than dwelling on it. Thus from Fritz Leiber's classic “The Girl with the Hungry Eyes,” where advertising is paralleled with vampirism, through the stymied desire to use a Sylvia Plath poem about arrested male-female relationships, to the awesome “Down Among the Dead Men” by Gardner Dozois and Jack Dann which defies a brief description as surely as it defied publication for so long, we see vampires used to investigate some aspect of the human condition. My heart warmed.

More honesty. I have to confess that I only took this book to review because I had just read and enjoyed Ellen Datlow's latest anthology, **Alien Sex** (Dutton, \$18.95). Much more science-fictional, it features a similar mix of old and new, poetry and prose, famous and less-well-known writers including our own Geoff Ryman, and the legendary “Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex” from Larry Niven. And it is similarly provocative and outrageous. It might be compared to the recent English collection *Arrows of Eros* edited by Alex Stewart, except that while Alex's book is about sex, *Alien Sex* is about almost anything but, exactly as the vampire book is about anything but vampires. Ms Datlow is to be congratulated for bringing the art of

anthologizing to a new high. This is repetition I admire.

**H**aving got back to science fiction, I must discontinue the theme of repetition for a moment simply because I have never heard of Margaret Wander Bonanno before. Yet it says here she has published six other novels previously, including two *Star Trek* novels. Her most recent novel, **The Others** (St Martin's Press, \$19.95), concerns the fate of a highly sophisticated elder race at the hands of a brasher, younger and more violent race, as told by Lingri the Chronicler. Now I can talk about repetition again. We are all familiar with the quoting of pseudo-texts such as the *Encyclopedia Galactica* or the *Hitch Hiker's Guide* as a background device. Bonanno begins this book in this style with a background “quotation” from *Essays of Wiseliki Philosopher*, and manages the dry, stilted tone of the formal academic philosopher rather well. Then we turn the page, and Lingri's first person narrative is written in exactly the same style. This alternation of voice but not tone goes on throughout the book. Add to this character names such as Thrassin, Rau, Jeijinn, Dweneth and Renna, and a simple map at the front of the book which features (surprise!) an archipelago, and I think that despite the claim that this is *A Science Fiction Novel* blazoned across the cover, we can see that we have strayed into the realms of fantasy, which I find even less interesting than horror. I can't tell you any more of what this book is about, because between the strange names and the stiff prose, I couldn't follow the story at all.

**N**o such problems with Walter Jon Williams' latest novel, **Days of Atonement** (Tor, \$19.95). It is set in a very near future USA so that it is recognizably almost here and now. There is real extrapolation of current social trends, but the centre of this novel is the character of Loren Hawn. He is police chief in a small town trying to cope with the ebbs and flows of the currents of the world as they cascade through his county. Plainly, he is motivated to do good, and he is a very efficient cop. Equally plainly, he often oversteps his authority, to the point where we realize he cannot go on like this. In among the tangled skeins of small-town policing are events which he finds incomprehensible to do with the nearby Advanced Technologies Laboratories installation. Among these are the sudden arrival and almost immediate death from gunshot wounds in the police station of a man who Loren had known, but who had died in a car crash twenty years before. Things are additionally complicated by his rivalry with the Security Chief of ATL. It is fascinating watching

Loren trying to cope with all these different circumstances in the same bluff masculine way. Sometimes it works better than others, but finally, he cannot live: he oversteps the mark too far. Nevertheless death holds redemption and a new chance, in this tightly plotted, hugely complex, but ultimately very satisfying novel.

So what of repetition? Well, along with this book came an earlier novel, **Voice of the Whirlwind** (Orbit, £3.99). It is set in what might be described as a cyberpunk milieu of a complex spacegoing culture based firmly on Earth with lots of space travel and hardware, and future weaponry. It is as good as his more recent *Angel Station* (I haven't read *Hardwired* yet, but you can bet I will, real soon), which is to say it is adequate hard science fiction. But the overall plot, down to details like the central character's providing for the safety of his family before the final shootout, is uncannily similar to *Days of Atonement*. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, discounting the differences of location and related characters, the same story is told in both books. This is a fascinating idea, and draws my mind back to both books constantly, to compare and contrast. Kim Stanley Robinson has done something very similar with his trilogy *The Wild Shore*, *The Gold Coast*, and *Pacific's Edge*, where the dense overlaying of the three tellings of the exact same story in three very different futures reveals all kinds of subtleties not so easily expressed in a linear narrative. And this kind of repetition – be various, but be the same – is the heart of great rhetoric. If Walter Jon Williams only appeared to be a competent writer before, then the publication of *Days of Atonement* has revealed a greater talent, and I look forward to the third telling of this story with great interest.

(Paul Brazier)

## Rhymers and Cobblers Wendy Bradley

Ellen Kushner, whose first novel *Swordspoint* I liked enormously, has produced a very different but equally successful novel in **Thomas the Rhymers** (Gollancz, £13.95), a story apparently based on a well-known (although not to me) folk tale. Thomas is a minstrel enchanted into spending seven years with the queen of fairy and he returns with the dubious gift of truth, which means he cannot tell a lie, but also he can answer any direct question accurately. The first three-quarters of the book, covering the abduction to and return from fairy, are

splendid and the last section which deals with his adventures after his return is touching and tender if a trifle underwritten. Each of the four sections is written in the first person by a participant in or observer of the story and there is great technical skill in the way Kushner recreates the lyrical atmosphere of a folk tale by both distancing us from the story and yet drawing into it as we see through the characters' loving as well as sceptical eyes. The whole book cries out to be read aloud – Radio 4 please note.

In contrast, I was trying to explain the plot of S.P. Somtow's **Moon Dance** (Gollancz, £14.95) to my father who asked me what I was reading. Well, I explained, basically there are these aristocratic European werewolves in the nineteenth century trying to found a city in the wild west where they can be left in peace only they find there is already a tribe of native American werewolves. These Indians are all ecologically sound and only kill and eat people who want to be killed but the Europeans are all decadent and enjoy killing for the sake of it. And then there is this child who is the son of a werewolf father and a human mother, only he has a multiple personality and he has funny turns where he is taken over by the psychopathic persona and both the Indian and the European werewolves believe if he can integrate his personality he can somehow be a werewolf saviour...

"Cobblers!" my father commented.

"I still need 250 words about it."

"Write cobblers 250 times?"

Sensible suggestion.

If you want horror, go instead to Dan Simmons' exemplary **Summer of Night** (Headline, £14.95) in which something nasty lurking in an old school building menaces a gang of children during the summer holidays. Simmons does early adolescence brilliantly and the children are both resourceful and convincing; we may have seen water pistols full of holy water before but these kids are ready to back them up with stolen shotguns. The book is especially strong on everyday life going on around the plot: strategies for coping with drunken fathers, memories of a grandmother before her stroke, a day off to play baseball, and the bullying, sexual awakening and other common elements of pre-teen life loom as large as one could realistically expect. The plot is, to coin a phrase, cobblers, but it is hugely entertaining cobblers with enough pace and detail to wheel you over the improbability of it all.

Gene Wolfe's latest, **Castleview** (New English Library, £13.95) left me feeling both completely inadequate and extremely pissed-off. The blurb led me to expect a retelling of the

Arthurian mythos in a contemporary American setting and sure enough there was a contemporary American setting, the inevitable small town of Castleview, named for the phantom castle which appears on its outskirts and may be some sort of mirage or of course some sort of connection to another world. A new family in town get tangled up in mysterious visions and apparitions but Will Shields (oh come on!), his wife Ann Schindler and their daughter Mercedes Schindler-Shields are split up for most of the book and the plot cuts with bewildering rapidity between them.

They meet up with Vivian Morgan – I can handle that one without recourse to Malory – but Dr von Madadh, Mr Fee, King Geimhreadh are so obviously fraught with symbolism I was left wondering whether I was being stupid or obtuse or whether there was some key text that would give me the clue and which I had failed to read. But no, a good ten minutes research in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* and a consultation with a handy world authority on Malory confirm that, whatever the blurb may have to say, Wolfe is not playing games solely with the Morte d'Arthur. Without the key to the story I still don't know what happened to whom or why – answers on a postcard care of Interzone – but who can love a book that makes them feel dumb?

And finally there is **Black Trillium** (Grafton, £13.99) in which Marion Bradley, Julian May and Andre Norton jointly write a fantasy tale of three princesses prophesied to be the saviours of their kingdom and the destroyers of its usurpers. Each pursues a magical quest and acquires a magical object and these objects build into a sceptre of power. In accordance with the Rule of Three there are of course three things wrong with this book: the characters, the plot and the writing.

The characters are utterly predictable; wise elder sister, tomboyish middle and sweetly soppy youngest and they are even for goodness' sake blonde, redhead and brunette, like some medieval Andrews Sisters. The plot is laid out at their birth when the leadenly literal prophecy is made and they then have to trudge around fulfilling it exactly according to plan, depriving the story of any interest. However the fatal flaw is the writing, which shows none of the skill of any of the three authors but rather reads as if composed by a committee, a camel where it should have been a racehorse. *Black Trillium* is not a book, it is a marketing concept – take three leading brand names, three tired old products, stud with pegs for the sequels, games and sharecroppings which are no doubt even now in production... Can three major fantasy talents have

simultaneously been replaced by their evil twin sisters? Are the pods taking over? Great Scott, even Weiss and Hickman do this sort of thing better!!

(Wendy Bradley)

## Horrors That You Pay For Jones & McIntosh

**F**antasy Tales (Robinson, £2.95) has come a long way since it began life back in 1977 as a small-press publishing venture, with considerably more issues behind it than you'd think from the number 5 on this latest one. The magazine was originally modelled (quite deliberately) on the old pulp magazines of the 1930s and 40s – in particular, *Weird Tales* – and went through 17 issues as a semi-prozine, winning awards for its mix of fantasy and horror. Then in 1988 Robinson Publishing fairy-godmothered it into fully professional status and a new paperback format, starting with issue 1 (not to be confused with issue 1 circa 1977). It appears twice yearly (which is how we get up to the current number 5) and if something of the old pulp ambience has been sacrificed to give it more the appearance of an original anthology than a magazine, then editors Steven Jones and David Sutton have managed to keep the basic feel of the stories much the same as in the small-press days. They have set out to provide a collection of varied, entertaining and accessible stories in the fantasy/horror genres and – very largely – they've succeeded.

The featured writers are a mix of new and established, including some from the US, and the subject matter ranges from the routine but readable sword and sorcery of Ramsey Campbell's "The Changer of Names" (apparently a sequel to an earlier story here) to the various paranoid of Garry Kilworth's "Networks" (urban) and Lisa Beckett's "Family Ties" (something-nasty-in-the-woodshed). "Invisible Boy" by Roberta Lannes is ultimately more sad than scary, while David J. Schow's chilling "Night Bloomer" is likely to put anyone off gardening. Rather against the odds, one of the best stories here is Lee Barwood's "Honour Bright," a tale of unashamed heroic wish-fulfilment, which succeeds due to the single-minded conviction with which the writer tells her tale.

There are a number of rough edges, and quite a few of the stories are little more than makeweight, but then, with the range of styles on offer, Fantasy Tales is never likely to please all of the people all of the time. It is, however, unquestionably good value for money.

**B**est New Horror (Robinson, £6.99), edited by Stephen Jones (again) and Ramsey Campbell, is altogether more substantial. It's bigger (390 pages, 20 stories) more expensive (£7.95) and, as the title suggests, it creams off some of the best stories published in the genre in 1989. Regular *IZ* readers will remember Kim Newman's "Twitch Technicolor" and Ian Watson's "The Eye of the Ayatollah," whilst Stephen Gallagher's excellent story "The Horn" and Nicholas Royle's "Archway" both appeared in recent UK anthologies. Good stuff, all.

Most stories here, though, are likely to be new to most British readers. There's Robert R. McCammon's short, sharp shock of an opener, "The Pin," and Alex Quirba's nervy, unsettling "Breaking Up," both of which deal, convincingly, with the theme of people going insane. Laurence Stalg's "Closed Circuit" is creepy urban paranoia in a multi-storey car-park, and Donald R. Burleson's "Snow Cancellations" is pretty much what it's title claims. Ramsey Campbell's "It Helps if You Sing" is somewhat minor-league by his own standards, but nonetheless keeps you reading right to the end, and Brian Lumley's story of a holiday-turned-nightmare, "No Sharks in the Med," pulls few surprises but is well-detailed enough to make it a thoroughly satisfying read.

Cherry Wilder reaches back to the holocaust for the horror in "The House on Cemetery Street" while Gregory Frost, in "Lizaveta" shifts even further back, to pre-revolutionary Russia. "...To Feel another's Woe" by Chet Williamson, transposes the vampire legend to the world of the modern New York stage – but it's not blood the vampire of the story sucks from her artist-lovers. Thomas Tessier's "Blanca" is a stylish excursion to a vaguely Latin American country of the imagination where there's "nothing to do except disappear" whereas Robert Westall's "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Molyneux" takes us to a very English, very haunted church. Richard Laymon's "Bad News" perhaps the most straightforward horror yarn here, about a sort of mini-Alien transplanted into downtown America. Fast and fear-some.

Cloudier, more atmospheric horror tales are offered by D.F. Lewis' "Mort Au Monde" and Thomas Ligotti's "The Strange Design of Master Rignolo." Both are strange indeed, but will have an undoubted appeal to some readers, as well as providing an interesting counterpoint to the more conventional horror yarns.

It's a pity though that the longest story here, "At First Just Ghostly" by Karl Edward Wagner, while readable enough, is otherwise a fairly hackneyed tale of an sf convention, alcohol and saving the universe.

Nevertheless, overall the stories come out high on both readability and quality; there's an introduction from the editors that gives a useful overview of horror in 1989, and right at the end, just when you thought it was safe, comes an eight page "Necrology" section detailing those who didn't see the year out. If you like horror fiction, you'll find that Best Horror delivers the goods.

The obvious comment to make in comparing this book with Fantasy Tales would be to say that you get what you pay for – Best Horror is undeniably the better collection – but then with the range of material at the editors' disposal, that's only to be expected. Our advice, if you've the cash and the inclination, would be to try both.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

## Not This, Not That Gwyneth Jones

**T**wo opposing pairs of paperbacks: a short-story collection and a novel each, from on the one hand an avowedly feminist list; on the other from the Warhammer stable, which – for reasons too numerous to mention – is not required to explain its position on sexual politics. What unites these four books, however, is not so much sexual chauvinism – or any insight, intentional or otherwise, on the great divide – instead it is the way they're all equally self-consciously, distanced from real life science fiction.

On this showing, the new Star Wars decor has not energized the dirtied-down *LOTR* clones of Warhammer. The anthology *Deathwing* edited by David Pringle and Neil Jones (GW Books, £4.99) is passable but there's no story I could single out as rising above the simplest war-comic formula. Ian Watson's novel *Inquisitor* (also £4.99) is somewhat more entertaining. But in spite of Watson's fun and games with a kind of Militant Tendency gloom that threatens the Imperium from within (is this a roman à clef?), this is no *Drachenfels*. But if you are still reading war comics, and you like lovingly graphic descriptions of The Thing That Died In My Fridge And Then Took Over The Universe (as one might hope, Watson does a good line in these) – Well, in that case, either book is overpriced but probably worth a try.

**M**uch the same, with a little search and replace, can be said for Jane Palmer's *Moving Moosevan* (Women's Press, £4.95). This is a sequel to Palmer's debut novel *The Planet Dweller*, and is the same kind of mildly amusing romp – a sixties British B movie about Things From Outer Space,

with those essential nondescript women – secretaries, lab assistants, housewives, screaming girl (remember her on the credits?) – here running the show. This makes the book sound better than it is, and perhaps Palmer's big mistake is that she's left out the genuinely scary bits that livened up those movies.

Palmer is one of those – school of Douglas Adams – who "refuses to take sf seriously". Warhammer, with its tradition of stealing and quoting, can be irrelevant fun – or, at the worst, cynical and weary grave robbery. Candas Jane Dorsey, in *Machine Sex* (Women's Press, £4.95) also takes an outsider's stance; but this collection is another kind of beast altogether. Dorsey approaches each of her classic sf scenarios (the stranded colonists, the survivors after the end of the world...) in an entirely literary, and entrancing, style. It is only by small admissions, as if reluctantly, that an impeccable consciousness of the corpus emerges.

The title story is the exception to this rule; and I don't know why the back copy calls it a "parody" of cyberpunk. Parody is the lifeless refuge of a writer with no ideas of her own. *Machine Sex* is a dead-pan cyberpunk classic, brilliantly told. Girl writes program, girl loses program, girl goes after the cheating big guys... "Angel" – the naked woman at the computer – possesses exactly the battered gutter talent and naive bitterness that such a dumb and no-revenge adventure requires. Dorsey doesn't have to do parodies. She can do the real thing, and twist it any way she wants to.

My particular favourite however is the last in the book – a first-person narrative of a deracinated space/time traveller. Dorsey is Canadian, and "Willows" is a very Canadian story, about the urban fringes and the wilderness, about divided cultures, divisive language and feeling like a tourist in your own country. It's also a story that illustrates well the clear overview of genre that can make the outsider's position a positive advantage. This is a fine collection. If you like good writing and you like science fiction, you should buy it.

(Gwyneth Jones)

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## UK Books Received

December 1990

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian. *Frankenstein Unbound*. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-53096-5, 218pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in 1973; this is the film tie-in edition, with a cover illustration from Roger Cormon's *Frankenstein Unbound*.) 3rd January.

Asimov, Isaac. *The Asimov Chronicles: Fifty Years of Isaac Asimov*. Edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4690-6, 836pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; it contains 50 stories from the entire range of Asimov's published career, 1939 to 1988; proof copy received.) 11th April.

Banks, Iain M. *The State of the Art*. Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-19669-0, 171pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Sf collection, first edition; contains six short stories plus the title novella which was originally published in the USA as a separate small book in 1989; one story, "A Gift from the Culture," first appeared in *Interzone*; proof copy received.) 28th March.

Bradley, Marion, Julian May and Andre Norton. *Black Trillium*. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13717-7, 347p, hardcover, £13.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; an unusual three-way collaboration; although the authors are listed in alphabetical order, publishing wisdom has it that this was initially Julian May's project.) 17th January.

Butcher, William. *Vernes's Journey to the Centre of the Self: Space and Time in the Voyages extraordinaires*. Foreword by Ray Bradbury, Macmillan Press, ISBN 0-333-49293-5, 206pp, hardcover, £35. (Critical study of Jules Verne's fiction; first edition; this seems to be a very learned work, fully annotated, indexed, etc.; we're astonished, though, that its fairly extensive secondary bibliography contains no reference to what seem to us to be the two best works of Verne criticism, namely Michel Butor's stimulating essay "The Golden Age in Jules Verne" [circa 1960] and Jean Chesneau's very readable book *The Political and Social Ideas of Jules Verne* [1972].) Late entry: 27th September publication, received in December.

Davies, Philip John, ed. *Science Fiction, Social Conflict and War*. Manchester University Press, ISBN 0-7190-3451-5, 186pp, trade paperback, £8.95. (Collection of critical essays, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; contributors include Martha A. Barter, H. Bruce Franklin and Edward James, on subjects such as racial conflicts, sexual politics, the Vietnam war and nuclear holocaust, all as envisioned and reflected in sf.) 10th January.

De Lint, Charles. *Greenmantle*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31579-X, 328pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; the author is a Dutch-born Canadian, and Pan have already published his earlier fantasy *Moonheart* with some success; uh...we think this second title has been used before – by a certain well-known writer who was Governor-General of Canada, no less; proof copy received; there is a

simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 8th March.

Denning, Troy. *Dragonwall: The Empires Trilogy, Book Two: "Forgotten Realms"*. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-014370-X, 311pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 31st January.

Effinger, George Alec. *When Gravity Falls*. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-25555-X, 276pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; this one was highly praised on its publication in America [and at least one sequel has since been published in the States]; its first appearance in Britain has been inexplicably delayed; this is actually the American "Bantam Spectra" edition, fourth printing, with a UK price and ISBN sticker.) 15th January.

Foss, Chris. *Diary of a Spaceperson*. Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85028-048-7, 143pp, hardcover, £16.95. (Art collection, first edition; consists of a short fictional tale by the artist, accompanied by colour reproductions of his "lumbering spaceship" paintings interspersed with bare breasts; very odd.) 17th January.

Jones, Jenny. *Fly by Night: Volume One of Flight Over Fire*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3398-5, 499pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 42.) 10th January.

Kerr, Katherine. *Polar City Blues*. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13556-5, 282pp, £13.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; a first venture into sf by the author of the "De-verry" fantasies.) 17th January.

Kessel, John. *Good News from Outer Space*. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21011-3, 402pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; this one received a good deal of praise on its first appearance in the States.) 24th January.

Knight, Gareth. *The Magical World of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield*. Foreword by Owen Barfield, Element Books [The Old School House, The Courtyard, Bell St., Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 8BP], ISBN 1-85230-169-4, 258pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Critical study, first edition; the emphasis seems to be mainly on the elements of "mythopoia and magic" in the writings of the named authors.) 31st January.

Koontz, Dean R. *The Bad Place*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3444-2, 500pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 10th January.

McQuinn, Donald E. *Warrior*. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4628-0, 634pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; the author has previously written non-sf novels; this futuristic quest-epic is quite a tome, and its advertised as the first of a trilogy; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 14th February.

Morrow, James. *City of Truth*. Illustrated by Steve Crisp, Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3693-5, 104pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 31st January.

Pohl, Frederik. *Outnumbering the Dead*. Illustrated by Steve Crisp, Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4615-9, 110pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 31st January.

Preuss, Paul. *Maelstrom: Arthur C. Clarke's 'Venus Prime' Series*. Illustrated by Darrel Anderson. Afterword by Arthur





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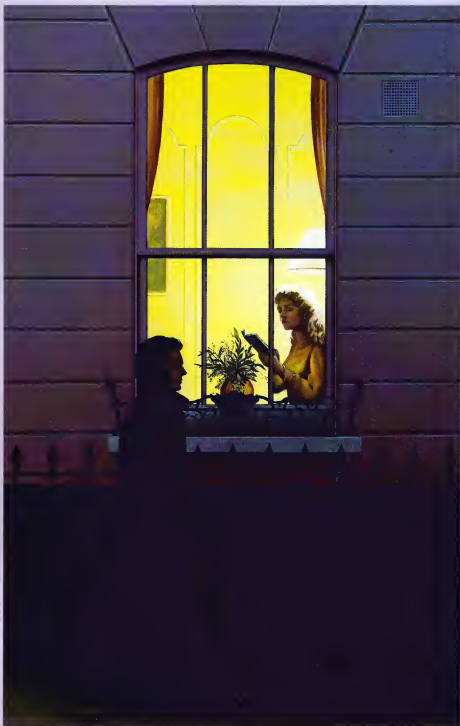
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